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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XXIX.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., January 6, 1886.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

No. 376



"COME, COME! HURRY UP, AND DON'T KEEP THE TOLL-GATHERER WAITING!"
CRIED THE OUTLAW CHIEF.

OR,
The High Horse on the Rio Grande.

A Tale of the Texan Frontier.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE HIGH HORSE OF THE PA-
CIFIC," "THE FRESH OF FRISCO," "OVER-
LAND KIT," "GOLD DAN," "RED
REVOLVER," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE FRONTIER.

"MAKE your game, gentlemen, make your game; if you don't play you can't win! Make your game and grasp a fortune while you have the chance!"

So cried a tall, muscular man, with resolute features, half-hidden by a full beard, who sat by the faro-table in one of the principal places of "amusement" in the town of El Paso in the year of our Lord eighteen hundred and—

But what matters the precise date?

Nothing at all!

And perhaps it is as well not to give it, for it is a strange story that we have set out to write, dealing with some men and women who even

now walk the earth and it is better not to bring them too prominently into the light, now that the scenes of which we are to write have faded into obscurity.

But it will give the attentive reader a pretty good idea of the time to say it was at that stirring period when the near approach of the Iron Horse across the vast Texan prairies had given a new life to this part of the Texan frontier.

Away back to the time when Sam Houston and his confederates raised the banner of rebellion against the arrogant Mexican, and succeeded in the struggle which gave another star to the American flag, the spot of the Rio Grande known as El Paso has been a noted crossing-place on the river—"the great river of the north," but the settlement, almost entirely on the Mexican side of the stream has never amounted to much, being one of the sleepy, half-dead villages peculiar to the Mexican land.

But when the railroad came leaping forward with its mighty strides and it was apparent that at El Paso the connection would be made with the Mexican railroads, the town took a new lease of life.

And by the time the graders on the line had got within three or four miles of the river, quite a flourishing railroad camp had grown up on the American side of the river at El Paso.

It is hardly worth while to descend to particulars in describing this mushroom-like town, for it did not differ particularly from other towns which owed their being to similar circumstances, and the reader has probably read the description a dozen times.

So we will come at once to the particulars which we set out to chronicle, merely saying that El Paso was like all the towns which owe their rise to unnatural circumstances.

The railroad had established a supply-camp near that point; within a few miles of the village three or four hundred men were hard at work upon the new line, and when the day's toil was over it was but natural that they should flock into El Paso for amusement.

And so it was that every second shanty in El Paso was either a drinking-saloon, a gambling hell, a restaurant, a dance-hall, or all four combined in one.

After nightfall El Paso was a "lively" town. Like the beast of prey, which it resembled, it slept all day that it might be ready for its victims at night.

There was no town organization, no government, for the town had sprung into existence within the space of a month, and therefore each man was a law unto himself.

But the town was quite a peaceable one despite this fact.

Possibly it was because every man knew that his neighbor was armed and that he would not hesitate to use his weapons if there was occasion to do so; therefore, unless a man was bent upon getting into a row that would be pretty certain to end in bloodshed, he was careful about giving offense.

Of course there was a quarrel now and then, and a few men had "died with their boots on," to use the western expression indicative of a violent death.

And it was the sense of the community in these matters that if it was a fair fight, and no undue advantage had been taken, no blame could be attached to the victor, even if he succeeded in killing his antagonist.

The dead man was quietly buried by his friends, or by sympathizing strangers, if he was without acquaintances in the town, and then everything went on as usual.

A man who attended to his own business was not any more apt to get into trouble in El Paso than in a quiet country town, while on the other hand if a fellow became possessed of the idea that he was able to clean out the "hull town," there wasn't a place under the sun where he could be accommodated with a fight more quickly.

But wise men, who were able to look a little ahead so as to scan the future, foresaw that in time the new camp would be apt to be the scene of serious trouble.

The Mexicans across the river looked with jealous eyes upon the hasty growth of the "North American" settlement, and on two or three occasions when the "Greasers" had crossed the river with the idea of picking up some of the money which the Gringos were scattering so loosely, they had not scrupled to win the cash of their opponents by unfair means, and being detected in the attempts, had been handled with scant ceremony.

Threats of retribution had been made, and the Mexicans in their rage had even gone so far as to say that one of these days they would come over and "clean out" the camp.

Then, too, the cowboys from New Mexico were beginning to visit the town, and as they always came in a squad, well-armed, and were accustomed to ride into El Paso with as grand an air as though they owned the whole place, it was easy to see that some day they would carry this matter too far, and then there would be a fight which would be certain to shake El Paso to its center.

As we have said, the town was growing rapidly; each new day witnessed the erection of

a new shanty, either a good-sized structure devoted to business purposes, in the town proper, or a rude hut, designed to shelter some adventurer who had determined to try his luck in this quarter, stuck on the outskirts of the camp.

Like all towns of this description, there were fully ten men to one woman, but in spite of the difficulty and danger of the journey, for at the time we write it was no holiday trip to reach El Paso, there were quite a number of the fair sex in the camp; we use the term "fair sex," for that is the correct thing to do, but a due regard for the truth compels us to make the statement that the most of them were not entitled to be termed "fair" in any sense of the word, for they were neither so in appearance nor disposition.

But there was one of the few "ladies" of El Paso who was fully entitled to be called fair, the belle of the town, although she was a newcomer.

But where she had come from and what chance of fortune ever induced her to bend her wandering footsteps to that remote corner of Texas was a mystery.

About a week previous to the time that our story begins, next door to the hotel a one-story shanty had been erected.

As yet El Paso only boasted one regular hotel, although it had a score of drinking-saloons with restaurants attached, but none of them offered any accommodations for sleeping.

The hotel was a good-sized, two-storied wooden building, situated right in the center of the town, and bore upon its front in flaming letters its title, which was:

THE GREAT PACIFIC RAILROAD HOTEL. BARNABY GOSLTON.

The landlord was a broad-shouldered, middle-aged, good-natured Englishman, the very type of a Briton and of a landlord.

His name, though, was too odd for the free and easy citizens of El Paso to bother with, and by common consent it had been shortened to Old Goose, much to his disgust, and he never failed to remonstrate warmly with any careless citizen incautious enough to address him by his nickname.

The landlord superintended the erection of the building and when it was discovered that it was intended for a small store with a living room in the rear, Goselton was pestered with questions in regard to what kind of a store he was going to open, and whom did he intend to put in to run it.

The landlord replied that it wasn't any speculation of his and all he knew about the matter was that a stranger, who wrote a big scrawling hand and signed his letters M. Umberson, had written him from Socorro, up in New Mexico, asking if a good lot on the main street near the hotel could be leased at a reasonable rate and what it would cost to erect a shanty after the rude plan inclosed.

Goselton had a vacant lot on the north side of the hotel and being glad of a chance to get some revenue out of it jumped at the chance.

He had an estimate made of the cost of the building, stated his rent and sent the particulars to his unknown correspondent.

In due time back came an answer that all was agreeable, accompanied by the request that he, Goselton, would be kind enough to have the building erected immediately and inclosed was an order on the express company for the money.

Of course Goselton was only too glad to oblige a customer who did business in such a business-like way and so the shanty was begun.

And that was all he knew about the matter.

Of course this strange proceeding gave rise to a great deal of talk, and many were the speculations indulged in by the idle gossips in regard to what kind of a store it was going to be.

Not a saloon evidently, for it was entirely too small.

The mystery ended one night though, for a freight wagon came into town, laden with various articles of household furniture, and a little fellow who at the first glance looked like a ten-year-old boy, but upon a second inspection stood revealed as a dwarf of mature age, went into the hotel, introduced himself to Goselton as the writer of the letters signed M. Umberson and asked for the keys to the shanty.

But the dwarf—who was afterward found to rejoice in the name of Old Zip Coon—was not "M. Umberson."

The owner of the shanty was a woman, a beautiful blonde-haired girl, with dark eyes, lovely complexion, and an exquisite figure; Margaret Umberson she was called.

Old Goose, going over to the shanty to see if he could be of any service was the first to discover this beautiful girl and the jolly Briton was so surprised by the discovery that he hardly knew what to say.

As he afterward confided to his cronies, when he related the particulars of his discovery of the lady:

"I was that astonished, gents, that you might have knocked me down with a feather, 'pon my honor!"

The girl's story was simple enough. She was all alone in the world and had been

recommended to settle in El Paso, as it was assumed to have the best chance of any of the new towns along the Rio Grande.

It was her idea to open a little shop for the sale of home-made bread, pies, cakes, boiled eggs, sandwiches and such simple refreshments.

The worthy Briton was afraid that it wouldn't be a "go," as he phrased it, but he hesitated to express his opinion to the girl as she seemed so confident.

But in this he was wrong, for she did a thriving trade from the beginning.

It was the general opinion though that the customers patronized the shop more for the sake of getting a look at the fair mistress than from any real need of the wares she sold.

But she was a girl who was not inclined to be conversational, even with the few young bucks of the town who set themselves up as lady-killers, and although pleasant and agreeable to all who favored her with their patronage, yet when they attempted to get her into conversation she would politely beg to be excused and withdraw from the store, after summoning the dwarf to wait upon the customers.

And none of the "boys" could boast of getting the best of the dwarf.

Old Zip, who had a deep base voice such as would appertain to a stalwart man of forty, was inclined to be irritable; he would not stand the least bit of nonsense and was as plucky as a lion despite his size, as one of the townsmen discovered to his cost upon a certain occasion.

He had bet that he could manage to keep the girl in conversation for at least ten minutes, and when she vanished before five had expired, in his anger, he attempted "to get squar," as he expressed it, on Old Zip.

But the dwarf had a better tongue and got so much the best of the wordy encounter, that in his rage the young fellow leaned over the counter and expressed his intention of pulling Old Zip's nose, until he made "the tears come out of his ears."

But he was not able to accomplish this feat, for Old Zip produced a big revolver from under the counter and blazed away, the muzzle of the revolver so near to the face of the man shot at that the powder flame singed his mustache and beard.

In dismay he fled, and when in the street he surveyed himself in order to see what damage he had sustained, his disgust was great when he discovered that the dwarf's bullet had cut away the tip of his left ear.

After that time all the jokers of the town fought shy of the dwarf.

For almost a week the pretty girl and her enterprise was the talk of the town and then a new event claimed the attention of the citizens.

CHAPTER II.

THE MYSTERIOUS SPORT.

ABOUT fifty feet from the hotel, along the main street toward the river, a large shanty had been in process of construction, and the man who was superintending the work gave out that it was intended to be a first-class shebang—to use the local vulgate—devoted to the goddess, Fortune, or in other words, a gambling-hell.

The man was a stranger to the town, and one who had excited immediate attention from the moment he set foot in El Paso.

In person he was a muscularly-built man of middle age, with a dark, forbidding face, the lower part covered with a heavy beard.

His swarthy complexion, coupled with the fact that both eyes and hair were jet-black, gave rise to the suspicion that he was a foreigner, either Spanish or Italian, so the gossips thought, but his name afforded no clew.

Michael Daymon he called himself, and being silent and reserved by nature, this was about all the information in regard to the stranger that El Paso learned.

When the shanty was completed, a sign was affixed over the door, which read:

"THE ROYAL ROAD TO WEALTH!"

There was something in this that tickled the fancy of the adventurous men who had sought the frontier to better their condition in life, and although the moment the sign was put up a hot dispute arose as to whether there was any truth in it or not, for the most of the men who had "been thar," cried out that a gaming-hell, instead of being the royal road to wealth, was in reality the gate to poverty; but Buck Kleppelman, the oldest "sport" in town, upset the argument, and silenced the doubters by saying:

"It's true, every word, if you are playing in good luck."

"I went into Bolly Lewis's place in Cincinnati once when I was about strapped—only had a five-dollar note in my pocket, and I broke the bank, and came out at four o'clock in the morning thirty thousand ducats ahead."

"If that ain't a royal road to wealth, what is it?"

This was a poser, and the crowd gave it up.

When the opening night of the saloon came, about everybody in the town dropped in to see the place.

It was nicely fitted up, but unlike the other saloon, only a single game—faro—was run.

There was a bar in one corner, of course, but no conveniences for any game of chance but faro.

And then there was another strange thing about the place.

There was a mystery about the dealer who sat behind the table, and slipped the cards so deftly.

In person the dealer appeared to be a young man, rather under the medium height, as near as any one could ascertain, for no one had ever seen the party upon his feet, and it is not always easy to judge correctly regarding the height of any one from a sitting position only.

The dealer was dressed in a complete suit of black broadcloth, the vest cut high in the neck and buttoned up so tightly that none of the shirt but the collar was visible.

A soft, black slouch hat covered his head, beneath which came coal-black hair in little wavy curls, and was pulled down low over his eyes, not as a disguise, for the face was completely covered with a black mask so that all that could be distinguished of the features was a pair of gleaming eyes.

The hands too were covered with a pair of black kid gloves the ends of the fingers being cut off so that the wearer wouldn't have any difficulty in handling the cards.

This mysterious personage gave rise to a deal of talk in the town and at the beginning a great many bets were made as to whether the dealer was a man or a woman, the majority holding to a belief that the dealer was a female, on account of the slight figure, slender hands and a generally feminine look.

But when the proprietor of the saloon was appealed to in order to decide the wagers, he said:

"Draw the bets, gentlemen; my dealer is neither man nor woman, but a machine, and that is the reason why the mask is worn."

"The artist who got the thing up is a genius, but he said the human face was too much for him."

"If I make it out of wax it will have a death-like look which will be sure to scare your patrons away," he said, so this genius decided to cover the face with a mask.

And this tale was delivered with the utmost gravity.

But El Paso wouldn't "have it."

"Do you see anything green in my eye?" was the peculiar question put when the proprietor of the Royal Road to Fortune had finished his explanation.

But as he did not deign to vouchsafe any more satisfactory solution of the mystery the curiosity excited by the strange circumstance was not abated.

"It is a clever trick to advertise the place," so the majority of the townsmen declared.

Another strange fact about the matter was that no one ever saw the mysterious dealer outside of the saloon.

It seemed to the men who had wagered their money on the question as to whether the dealer was a man or woman that the bets could be easily settled—since no information could be gained from the proprietor of the place—by keeping a watch on the saloon until the dealer came forth.

There were living apartments in the rear of the building, where Daymon had his quarters, keeping "bachelor's hall," so that it was not absolutely necessary for any of the inmates of the place to come forth, except at their own pleasure, but still it was but reasonable to suppose that the dealer would not remain cooped up in the shanty all the time.

So a watch was put upon the building, and so persistent were the men in regard to the matter, that for a week it was kept up day and night, but without any results.

Daymon and the barkeeper, "Sandy" Bill, came forth freely, but no sign was ever seen of the mysterious dealer.

Another strange thing about the place, too, was the fact that it was never open for business during the day, contrary to the usual custom, for on the frontier these avenues to Satan's dominions are seldom closed excepting during the small hours of the morning, when sleep claims man's attention.

But when questioned on this point the proprietor said, bluntly, that he wasn't running a game for coppers; that in the East, where he came from, a first-class place never ran a "day game," and he didn't calculate to do anything of the kind on the frontier.

The barkeeper, who was one of the old settlers, had been interviewed on the subject, but the "boys" had their labor for their pains.

"All I kin tell you about the raffle," he said, "is, that when I report for duty at eight o'clock at night, the dealer sits right behind the table, jest as all you chaps have seen him, and when the game closes at two or three in the morning, he leans his head on his hands, like as if he was tired, while the boss counts up the cash with me, and he never stirs while I am in the place."

It was very mysterious, and if it was not a carefully-devised plan to induce talk about the saloon, and so attract patronage, it most cer-

tainly had that effect, for every stranger who struck the town, when he heard the story about the mysterious dealer, was sure to seize upon an early opportunity to visit the saloon with the idea of unraveling the mystery.

On the evening on which our story commences, play had not yet begun, although the table was all ready with its stacks of checks and piles of gold and silver money, and the place was well-filled with people.

For a rough frontier saloon, Daymon conducted the place in a high-toned manner.

No one was ever invited or pressed to play; all were welcome to come in and make themselves at home, without being under any obligation to patronize either the bar or the gaming-table.

There were plenty of chairs, so the visitors could sit at their ease and rehearse the current news of the day, and every week a half a dozen Eastern newspapers were provided for the accommodation of the public at large.

And at ten o'clock each night, too, a lunch was set out, not a very elaborate one, consisting usually of crackers, cheese, salt fish, and once in a while some game, if the hunters of the neighborhood were anyway lucky.

Many a poor fellow, "down to the bed-rock," "clean broke" and looking around anxiously for something to do, had reason to bless the free-lunch counter of The Royal Road to Fortune, since it aided them to ward off the attacks of the gaunt monster, relentless hunger.

Almost every man who sets out a lunch bears a deadly animosity to the unfortunate wretches known as "free lunch fiends," but the owner of The Royal Road to Fortune was a man of a different stamp.

On the opening night when quite an elaborate lunch was spread, the proprietor took occasion to say a few words on the subject.

Every one was welcome to come and partake he said, and they need not drink or play, but he trusted that his courtesy would not be abused and that no one would make a beast of himself by attempting to ride a free horse to death.

And in justice to the few "bummers" that there were in El Paso it must be said they behaved themselves pretty decently and Daymon had no cause to complain.

As we have said there wasn't any solicitation to play indulged in by any one connected with the establishment.

All that was ever said was the proclamation always made by Daymon when the game was ready to open and with which our story commences.

"Make your game, gentlemen, make your game; if you don't play you can't win!"

"Make your game and grasp a fortune while you have the chance."

A half-a-dozen of the visitors lounged up to the table.

Four invested in some checks and the game began.

At first all bet very cautiously and only small sums were risked.

The lowest priced checks cost a dollar apiece and from that to five and ten; the game was without a "limit" as Daymon had tersely announced when the place opened.

"Any gentleman is at liberty to bet all the wealth he can raise and I'll 'see' it every time!" he declared.

"This bank bars nobody and nothing until she goes bust!"

And it was the general opinion of El Paso that a fairer statement couldn't be made.

As the evening wore away the throng around the table became larger and the betting more lively, so by the time midnight was reached there was a couple of thousand dollars in coin and bills on the table.

This to the man unacquainted with the subject would seem to be a large sum of money to have exposed to the grasp of any daring robber, but a pair of self-cocking revolvers were on a little shelf under the table, convenient to Daymon's hand, who always acted as cashier, while a similar pair of weapons on the same shelf were at the dealer's command, so any attempt to "get away" with the money would be easily frustrated and quickly punished.

Just as the hands on the clock, ticking on a shelf behind the bar, showed that midnight had come, two men coming from opposite directions met in front of the saloon.

The recognition was mutual.

"Do me eyes deceive me?" exclaimed one of them in a theatrical way, striking an attitude as he spoke.

"Is it the High Horse of the Pacific I perceive, or his ghost, straight from the shades of darkness?"

"Hold on! go slow! brace up, old man, and have some style about you!" the other exclaimed.

"Don't go to saying anything about the shades of darkness, for that is as good as to say I have come from a durned hot place that I ain't in any hurry to visit yet awhile."

And then the two shook hands heartily.

"Whar are you from, old man?" the one who was addressed by the other as the High Horse inquired.

A few words to introduce these two.

The man who was addressed by so odd a title was a noted character on the border.

He was called Gideon Goldlace, came from California originally, and bore the nickname of the "High Horse of the Pacific." He was a giant in size, gifted with enormous strength, and was easily a match for half a dozen common men.

The other was a veteran bummer, a man well known along the whole line of the frontier, who never paid for a drink, and yet never suffered for one.

Major Bum, as he was called, was one of the best-known characters along the whole line of the Rio Grande.

"I'm from down the river," he answered. "I've been as fur south as Laredo. I heard that there was a good opening fur business down that way, and, in fact, I did make quite a stake, but, unfortunately, was obliged to light out between two days on account of a wuthless cuss threatening to make dog's meat out of me because I knew how to play poker better than he did."

"Why didn't you go for the galoot and lay him out?"

"Oh! he was a tough cuss from Toughcussville, and I wasn't anxious to tackle him," the veteran replied, with a shake of the head.

"Besides, I had played Laredo for all it was worth, and it was time for me to get out. I had sucked it as dry as a squeezed orange."

"You see, colonel, after you have run a town of that kind for five or six months, the galoots get used to your little dodges, and you can't play your game right up to the handle."

"I had made a big stake, and I thought I had better get out."

"Wal, I'm glad to hear that, 'cos I might want to borrow a stake," Goldlace said.

"Not from me, colonel, for my stake is gone. Listen while I a tale unfold."

CHAPTER III.

THE BLACK BEARDS.

THE veteran braced himself against the house while the High Horse prepared to give due attention.

"I corraled a clean thousand dollars in hard cash in Laredo, and five hundred of that I skinned the bully out of at pcker."

"It was a rough deal I played on the man, I will admit that, for he was so full of fire-water that he couldn't see a hole through a forty-foot ladder; but his racket was to let me win the stamps and then go for me at the end and clean me out, but I managed to slip away, and before he had a chance to sober up I was miles away from the town."

"I got all the cash changed into bills, so I could carry them easily, and I sewed 'em up in the lining of my pantaloons, only leaving out a few dollars for expenses."

"I came right straight up the river, for I heard that there was the biggest kind of a boom in this town, and I was anxious to take a little of it in mine."

"All went smooth until last night, when I was about thirty miles below here, and I ran into a gang of cut-throats, who went for me in a way I despised."

"The Black Beards of the Rio Grande, they called themselves."

"Pears to me that I have heard tell of them critters afore," the High Horse observed.

"Well, now, they are jest old p'ison—Mexicans, Injuns, niggers, and white men, all mixed up."

"It was gitting late, and coming to a solitary ranch, I thought I would get a chance to bunk in for the night."

"The fellow who let me in was a Greaser, and I thought I had a soft thing until I got fairly into the durned hole, and then I found out that I had stuck my nose into a trap."

"The cusses all wore false beards and black ponchos, and the boss of the gang, the moment he got his eyes on me, seemed to guess that I was well-heeled."

"Mebbe you were a leetle nervous," the High Horse suggested.

"A man who hadn't anything to lose wouldn't have minded being introduced to sich a gang—a little thing like that wouldn't have worried him at all."

"They had it in for me, and though I swore like a Trojan that the few dollars I had in my pocket was all the wealth I possessed, they wouldn't have it, and put the screws on me in a way that made me howl."

"They kinder got an idea that I had wealth in my clothes, and they jest ripped them right open, and in course they struck my stamps at the first lick."

"Then they confiscated my horse, and booted me out of the ranch, and I had to hoof it hyer on foot, and hyer I am in El Paso without a 'red'!"

"Durn my cats if I don't sympathize with you!" Goldlace exclaimed.

"As I told you just now, I'm not flush myself but I guess I can spare you a fiver to help you along, and with that to start you, if you don't strike pay-dirt in this yere town, you ain't the man I take you to be."

The High Horse handed the veteran five dol-

lars in silver and the other received them with many thanks.

"Oh, I reckon I will be able to squeeze along, if I have any chance for my life," the veteran remarked.

"I'd like to stay long enough in this town and make a stake big enough so I could get square with those rascally Black Beards who went for me."

"Mebbe I will be able to give you a helping hand," the High Horse observed, thoughtfully.

"I have heard that these Black Beards of the Rio Grande are the biggest and worst band of cut-throats that has ever been known on the border, but I hadn't any idea that they ever come so far up the river as this."

"Perhaps they have heard that there was a boom in El Paso, hyer, and thought they would be apt to find good pickings in this neighborhood."

"Mebbe so, but I should think they would fight shy of this region, for the troops at the fort above are within easy reach."

Just at this point the conversation was interrupted by the approach of a half a dozen men, and as they evidently intended to enter the gaming saloon, the High Horse and the major drew off into the shadows at the corner.

There were some Mexicans in the party, and from their bearing, it seemed as if all of them were considerably under the influence of liquor.

The most prominent one of the party was a tall fellow, muscularly built, with long, shaggy black hair and a full beard of the same hue.

He was dressed after the fashion common to the border, big boots, rough pantaloons, woolen shirt and slouch hat, but his swarthy complexion and jet-black hair and eyes would seem to indicate that he was a Mexican.

As his eyes fell upon the sign painted upon the front of the saloon, he called the attention of his comrades to it.

"Aha, boys, do you see that?" he cried.

"The Royal Road to Fortune! That is exactly what we have been looking after for some time and now we come upon it."

"Let us enter and see whether the sign be true or false."

"If it is true we will come out with our pockets bursting with money."

"Aha!" cried the others in a chorus, smacking their lips at the prospect.

"But if it is not and we find we have been enticed into the saloon under false pretenses, we will have a few words to say to the man who put up the sign."

"Yes, yes," responded the others, and then they entered the building and disappeared from the sight of the two pards, who, from their position at the corner of the house, were keeping an eye upon them without apparently paying any attention to their conversation.

The moment the voice of the stranger fell upon the ears of Major Bum he started and laid his hand upon the arm of the High Horse.

Goldlace understood that this was not without meaning, for Major Bum was too old a bird to betray any interest in a stranger's trivial conversation without there was some good reason for it.

And the moment the last one of the party disappeared within the door, he said, excitedly:

"By the great jumping Jupiter! did you notice that fellow who spoke?"

"You bet! and a tony cuss he is too!" the High Horse replied.

"He's my mutton now, sure as you are born."

"Your mutton!"

"Yes, for a thousand dollars!"

And Goldlace could see that the old man was trembling with excitement.

"What are you driving at, anyway?"

"I know the voice—I would swear to that voice among a hundred, and don't you forget it," Major Bum exclaimed.

"Say, what on airth has got into you? Why, you seem all split up the back!"

"Brace up, old man, now; pull yourself together and have some style about you."

"It's the man, and I'll swear to it on a stack of Bibles as big as a meeting-house!"

"What man?"

"The captain of the Black Beards!"

It was now Goldlace's turn to be astonished.

"Do you really think it is so?"

"Oh, I'm certain of it!"

"Didn't you notice what a peculiar voice he has? no common voice, you know, at all."

"Yes, you are right there, for ducats!" the High Horse admitted.

"Kinder of a 'blooded' voice, so to speak. None of yer common low trash about it. A man with a voice like that shows that he's come of good stock and knows how to handle himself well, too."

"By the everlasting mountains! major, I shouldn't be surprised if you was right about it!"

"That's the galoot that went through me fer my leetle thousand," the veteran groaned.

"Wal, I tell you now that was an awful pull, and arter you had grabbed it so neatly, too," said the High Horse, sympathizing with the old man.

"Yes, but I say, I'm not a worm, you know, to be trodden on with impunity."

"Not much! You are altogether too healthy a galoot to play worm on anybody."

"I'm going to get squar' with this man, see if I don't!" the veteran declared.

"Say, pard, can't I count on you in this hyer extremity? Can't you jine in and help a fellow, you know?"

And Major Bum looked appealingly in the face of the other.

"Old man, I wish I may die if I don't do all I can for you!" Goldlace replied.

"You're a pretty good sort of a chap, although you do 'hang 'em up' right and left."

"My intentions are good," the major explained.

"Yes; the preacher folks say that the place down below is paved with good intentions," the High Horse rejoined.

"But, I say, let's go in and see what the galoots are up to. Mebbe they have come into the camp with the idea of having some fun."

"Very likely!"

"And if that is the case we may be able to take a hand in the b'ling."

"I haven't even got a pen-knife."

"Hyer's a spare revolver for you!"

The major stowed away the weapon and then the two entered the saloon.

CHAPTER IV.

THE STRANGERS.

THE saloon being so well filled with people the entrance of the six strangers did not attract any particular attention.

Strangers were too common in the town to cause remark, for new people were coming in every day, and the old ones departing, so restless is the spirit of the dwellers on the border.

The leader of the party—for such the man evidently was whom the major declared to be the outlaw captain—made his way directly to the faro-table, but his five followers did not go in a body behind him, but separated and mixed in with the crowd, yet one and all advanced toward the table, worming their way through the throng collected around the central point of attraction in a quiet manner so as not to attract attention.

The faro-table had been placed so that the crowd could only approach it on three sides, the wall forming the fourth.

Daymon was no green hand at this business, and he did not intend that any man, by the aid of the strong arm, should be able to seize the money which the decrees of fortune denied him.

When the new-comer came close to the table a player who saw his last chip swept away, retired with a curse at his ill-luck, and the stranger was able to take his place.

For the first time the eyes of Daymon and the stranger met, and they surveyed each other with a great deal of interest.

There was some subtle instinct in the nature of both men which told that the other was a foe.

"What is the limit of this game?" asked the stranger.

"No limit," replied Daymon.

"S'pose I put fifty-thousand dollars on a card?" the other questioned with an air of defiance.

"S'pose you do! That is the kind of betting I would like to see."

"I reckon you ain't got the money about your clothes to pay such a bet, though."

"I reckon that you hain't any right to worry about your bet being paid until you see some show for winning," the other retorted.

"Money talks! put up all you like and see if you can make a bet big enough to skeer this bank!" Daymon continued.

"Give me five hundred dollars' worth of chips, tens," and as he spoke, the stranger produced five one-hundred-dollar bills and threw them upon the table.

The gambler examined them carefully and threw two of them back.

"Counterfeit!" he exclaimed.

"No, they ain't!" cried the other, angrily.

"You don't know good money when you see it!"

"I'll bet you a hundred dollars to fifty that they are counterfeit and I'll leave it to Moses Goldstein, the best judge of money in the town!" Daymon replied.

The man mentioned by the gamester was a shrewd, middle-aged Hebrew who kept the largest store in the town, and in the opinion of the citizens what old Moses didn't know about money wasn't worth knowing.

The storekeeper was in the room and in obedience to the general cry advanced toward the table.

Goldstein was a round, fat Dutch Jew, with a face like a full moon, a scraggly beard and the most enormous hooked nose.

He always wore a large pair of light-blue spectacles, although most people who knew him asserted that he had the eyes of a hawk.

"There's the paper!" exclaimed the stranger, spreading out the bills upon the table.

"And if you dare to say that they are bad, curse me! if I won't make you eat 'em!"

"Oh, mine gootness! vat was dot? am I der richest man in the world, to make my meals wid hundred-tollar bills?" the tradesman exclaimed, with a grin.

A remarkable peculiarity in regard to the

old Jew was that no one ever succeeded in putting him out of humor.

Irate customers who had conceived the idea that they had been swindled by Old Moses had abused him in the most violent manner, called him all the names that they could lay their tongues to, cursed him from Hades to Halifax, as the saying is, without succeeding in arousing the Jew from his wonted placidity.

He would shrug his shoulders until they were so near his ears as to make him appear humpbacked, rub his hands softly together and with uplifted eyes call upon Heaven to witness that he was "der most honestest mans dat dere vas in der wourld!"

"Nice bills," he purred, softly, as he cast his eyes upon the suspicious bits of paper.

"Fine bills, so shelps me!"

"But are they good?" demanded the stranger, impatiently.

"Goot!" and the Jew shook his head a little doubtfully.

"Oh, yesh, very goot!"

"Aha! what did I tell you?" exclaimed the stranger, triumphantly.

"Give me small bills or silver for them," said the gambler, quietly.

"Oh, no, not for dat kind of monish," responded the Hebrew, immediately.

"Dey would be nice though for to frame and hang mid de wall for a sign."

There was a general chuckle by all the bystanders at this idea.

But the stranger caught up the notes which were really counterfeit, as the Jew was sharp enough to detect, and shoved them into his pocket.

"You miserable old rascal of a Jew you, don't you know a good bill when you see one?" he declared.

"Give me checks for three hundred then," he continued, addressing the gamester.

The checks were promptly furnished and the game proceeded.

The stranger put a hundred on the king and five minutes the gambler had the satisfaction of seeing the king turn up a loser and of raking in the chips.

The stranger never said a word but put a hundred more on the king.

This time he won. He allowed all the chips to remain on the card and added his last hundred to the pile.

The stranger was the only heavy better at the table, none of the rest daring to risk more than twenty or thirty dollars at a time.

Therefore all watched the stranger's game with a great deal of interest.

There were fully a dozen cards came out of the box before the king made his appearance and then it appeared on the losing side.

"Give me another five hundred's worth of chips!" exclaimed the stranger, shoving his hand into his breast as if to produce the money.

Daymon raked in the chips and then proceeded to comply with the demand.

But it was not money that the man produced this time but a cocked revolver which he leveled full at the head of the sport, and almost before any one in the room had any idea what he was up to, he had discharged the weapon.

And at the same moment his companions, who, as we explained, were scattered around the table, also drew revolvers, ready cocked for action and cried:

"Hands up or you are all dead men!"

Simultaneously the sentence came from the five throats as though it was but one man that spoke.

CHAPTER V.

THE RAID.

DAYMON was taken completely by surprise for the gambler had not the least idea that the stranger intended any foul play, although he had jumped to the conclusion from his looks that he was a dangerous customer, yet Daymon perceived the stranger's murderous intent in time to dodge, but though by so doing he undoubtedly saved his life yet he was not quick enough to escape a wound.

The ball "creased" his skull, and he dropped from the chair to the floor as though he had been killed upon the spot.

The moment the shot was fired the marauder—for such he evidently was—grabbed at the money upon the table, reaching for the pile of bills as being the most portable, and likely to pan out better than any handful of coin that he could grasp.

The dealer had dropped the silver box and reached for one of the revolvers lying so convenient to the hand on the shelf underneath the table, but hesitated to draw it, for death seemed certain to follow the action, one of the robbers having evidently been assigned to attend to the dealer, for he had been covered with his revolver.

Then the moment the outlaw chief secured the money, he cried:

"Vamose!"

This was evidently a prearranged signal for the moment it was given the marauders made a "break" for the open air.

Two jumped through the windows on the left-

hand side of the room, while the other four headed by the chief rushed for the door.

The frightened customers gave way before them, all eager to avoid a shot from the pistols, for not a man in the room had the least doubt that the scoundrels would not have the slightest hesitation in murdering any one in cold blood who attempted to interfere with their movements.

The operation was so bold and so adroitly performed that it was almost a complete success, and the marauders would have gotten off scot free with the plunder if it had not been for the veteran bummer and the High Horse.

Both were near the door but when the affrighted citizens recoiled from the rush of the outlaws they were forced back by the crowd, and only managed to extricate themselves from the throng in time to intercept the last man.

Major Bum dexterously thrust out his foot and the ruffian tumbled over it, and before he could recover himself, Goldlace, who was right behind Major Bum, was on him.

The ruffian was a muscularly built, powerful fellow, but was no match for the High Horse.

With a dextrous twist Goldlace bore the man to the ground and held him face downward so that he was perfectly helpless.

By this time the men who had been so awed by the scoundrels had, in a measure, recovered their courage, which had apparently oozed out at their fingers' ends.

Now that they were not cowed by the threatening weapons of the intruders they drew their own, and with many a loud and valorous cry, brandished them in the air.

"Kill the scoundrels!"

"Cut 'em to pieces!"

"Lynch 'em!"

The bold move of the High Horse and the veteran bummer in capturing the outlaw, had due effect upon them.

"Now, fellow-citizens, if you'll jest tie this critter, I'll see what I kin do to worry the other cusses outside!" Goldlace cried.

There were plenty of ready hands for this work.

Major Bum, with an eye to the main chance, first secured the outlaw's weapons and then went through his pockets, and there was so much confusion caused by the binding of the fellow that this operation of the veteran escaped notice, except by the owner of the valuables which he was after.

But his struggles and curses only seemed to make his captors poke and punch him as a warning to keep quiet and accept his fate with resignation.

So the major was enabled to get a good pair of revolvers and a bowie-knife, as well as a buckskin bag—a sort of a wallet, which the man had in his pocket—and as it appeared to contain a fair store of cash, the veteran was well paid for his trouble.

When the man was firmly secured, the High Horse called for volunteers.

"Now, feller-citizens, how many of ye are game to foller my lead for to try and salivate these pesky critters what have run in this hyer cold deal on us?"

There was a general yell from the throats of the bystanders, and they brandished their weapons in the air as if one and all were eager to be led against the robbers who had committed so bold an outrage.

Perhaps the fact that there wasn't much doubt from the hasty retreat the outlaws had made that they had secured so great a start as to render the task of overtaking them an almost impossible one, had something to do with the eagerness with which they responded to Goldlace's question.

By this time the dealer and a couple of the townsmen had raised the assaulted gambler from the floor, and the discovery was made that he was not materially injured.

But that he was not killed outright was not the fault of the outlaw chief, for there was not the least doubt that he had fired to kill.

"Come on then, boys, and we'll try our luck!" Goldlace exclaimed. "And some of you fellers hold onto that black-muzzled ruffian until we come back!"

"I'll look out for him!" declared the major, promptly, drawing one of the revolvers, of which he had despoiled the ruffian, from his belt, and flourishing it in the air.

This was a shrewd device on the part of the veteran bummer to escape taking any part in the fight, which would be certain to occur if the townsmen were lucky enough to overtake the fleeing marauders.

"Pitch in, boyees, for fun!" cried Goldlace.

The crowd had surged toward the door when the proposal had first been made to pursue the ruffians, and now they were about to run out when a most unlooked-for event occurred.

And in order to properly explain this, we must follow the marauders in their flight.

This was no chance exploit, got up on the spur of the moment, this robbery of the "The Royal Road to Fortune," but, on the contrary, a carefully planned scheme.

There were seven in the party, and they had approached the town on horseback, but just be-

fore reaching the settlement had dismounted and placed their horses in charge of one of the party, while the other six entered the town.

After they had got into the gaming-saloon, the man with the horses rode quietly up in the rear of The Royal Road to Fortune, keeping well out in the darkness, and away from the lights, so as not to attract attention.

This was a maneuver easily performed, for in the rear of the houses on the main street, there wasn't anything but an open plain.

When he reached the position to which he had been assigned, he halted and remained on the watch.

The noise of the pistol-shot came distinctly to his ears, and warned him that the trick, which had been so carefully planned by the outlaw chief, was being worked.

And the moment he heard the revolver-report, he advanced slowly toward the saloon, so that by the time the marauders made their exit from the saloon he was within a hundred feet of it in the rear.

The outlaws, knowing exactly where the horses were to be found, the moment they escaped from the saloon, ran toward the open prairie in its rear.

When they came to the horses, they vaulted to their backs; but when all were mounted, there came a cry of alarm from the man who had been left in charge of the animals, for he had discovered that there was one steed that lacked a rider.

"Hallo, captain!" he cried, "something's wrong!"

"Hyers a hoss with nary a rider!"

This was the first intimation that any of the band had received that one of their comrades had been either captured or killed in the flight.

The outlaws stared at each other, but the chief was prompt to act.

"Who is missing?" he cried, rapidly surveying the gang.

"Whar's Taos Jack?" he continued, before any one of them could speak.

They looked at one another.

The keen-witted outlaw leader had been the first to discover which one of the men it was who was missing.

"Durned if Jack ain't gone up!" cried one of the gang.

"He was right side of me in the shebang, and I was jest ahead of him through the door!" another added.

"They have got Jack, and no mistake!" exclaimed the captain, "and that won't do at all!"

"Boys, we must have him out of that shebang!"

"Ay, ay!" exclaimed the gang, waving their weapons in the air.

"It's risky business, and like running our heads into a hornets' nest, but it has got to be done!" cried the outlaw chief, with firm determination.

"We must get Jack out of this pickle, if we have to fight the whole town."

"We'll ride up to the door, and three of us dismount, while the other two hold the horses."

"Fire a volley into the saloon, and then dash in."

"Red Jose and Apache Pete will attend to the horses, and, boys, don't hesitate to empty your revolvers at anybody that comes near, for if you allow the horses to be captured, it will be apt to get us all wiped out!"

Both of the desperadoes swore that there wasn't men enough in El Paso to take the steeds from them, and the others expressed their determination to rescue their comrade or die in their tracks.

The party advanced rapidly, halted their horses by the side of the saloon; the outlaw chief and two of the men slipped from the saddle, and with a revolver in each hand made a dash for the door of The Royal Road to Fortune.

When they reached the entrance—the door always stood open when the place was running—they fired a volley, and then, with blood-curdling yells, rushed into the room.

This assault occurred just at the moment when the citizens, having so valorously resolved to capture the outlaws—inspired by the bold example of the High Horse—or know the reason why, were about to rush out.

Notwithstanding the courageous way in which they had determined to pursue the marauders, no sooner did they hear the shots, the balls of which came whistling over their heads, and the wild yells of the outlaws, and beheld them charging with drawn pistols into the saloon, than a panic seized upon them and they retreated in such hot haste, eager to get away from the doorway, that Goldlace, the only man in the room, with the exception of the veteran, Major Bum, who seemed to have his wits about him, was upset by the wild rush.

The prisoner, though, knew what he was about, and the moment he beheld his comrades in the doorway, he took advantage of the fact that his legs had not been fettered by cords, to deal Major Bum a most ferocious kick, and the veteran, perceiving that the citizens did not show any disposition to fight the invaders, gave vent to an awful howl and sunk down as if he was killed.

The captive then rushed forward to join his comrades.

And they immediately began to retreat the moment he reached them.

With a slash of his bowie-knife, the outlaw chief cut the cords which had bound him, and in another moment they were all out of the saloon.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PURSUIT.

"WAL, of all the dog-goned, durned set of pesky varmints I ever did see!" cried the High Horse, as he rose to his feet after being so unceremoniously knocked over by the rush of the panic-stricken citizens. "The hull boodle of you ain't got pluck enough for to fight the meanest kind of a yaller dog!"

But now that the marauders had retreated the courage of the townsmen again rose.

"Come on! come on!" they yelled, excitedly, brandishing the weapons which they had been too frightened to use when they had the chance.

"We'll wipe 'em out!"

And then, hearing the clatter of hoofs outside, guessing from this that the outlaws had taken flight, they rushed out of the saloon.

Their guess was correct, the outlaws having rescued their comrade, put spurs to their horses and were retreating rapidly.

And then the townsmen, wonderfully valorous now that the outlaws had fled, discharged their pistols after them, and some few of them rushed madly along the street in the direction that the fugitives had taken, yelling at the top of their lungs, and banging away with their pistols as if they really expected that they, on foot, could overtake the well-mounted horsemen.

"Of all the 'tarnal idiots that I ever run across in all my born days!" the High Horse exclaimed in disgust, as he stood outside the saloon and watched the antics of the crowd, some of whom were really acting as if they had lost their senses, so vain-gloriously did they boast of what they would have done if the outlaws had only given them any fair show.

Inside of ten minutes, though, the excitement cooled down somewhat, although all the town was in the street discussing the matter, for this was the boldest robbery that had ever occurred in the neighborhood, and, in fact, as one old borderer observed:

"For sheer deviltry it goes ahead of anything I ever heered on in my time."

And all the bystanders agreed to this with the exception of some of the chronic liars who seem to spring up like mushrooms in all new towns.

These fellows were full of yarns of what awful deeds they had seen and heard of, but the townsmen for once would not listen to the "ghost" stories, and the drawers of the "long bow" only had their labor for their pains.

This startling episode ended the night's fun as far as The Royal Road to Fortune was concerned.

The barkeeper announced that although Daymon was not seriously hurt, yet he had received a shock severe enough to make him want rest and put him in a condition which would not admit of his attending to any business that night.

So the saloon was closed up and the barkeeper departed leaving the wounded gambler and the mysterious dealer alone together.

The two returned to the apartment in the rear of the saloon and there the dealer removed the mask which so completely concealed the features, and the face of a beautiful, dark-eyed, dark-haired woman was revealed.

"By Jove, Nelly, that was a close call," Daymon remarked, producing a bottle of choice brandy from a closet in the corner of the room and helping himself to a liberal quantity of it.

"Yes, the ruffian intended to murder you."

"Not a doubt about it and he came into the saloon solely for that purpose, the infernal scoundrel!" Daymon replied.

"It was a miracle that you escaped!"

"Indeed it was, for I hadn't the least suspicion that there was any danger."

"I guessed that fellow was a desperado, of course, any one of any judgment could see that, but that he would attempt any such bold game as he tried never entered my thoughts."

"The very boldness of the game helped to make it successful though."

"There was a half a dozen of them in the party and the whole thing was cut and dried beforehand."

"They took a big risk for a small stake though for they only got away with about six hundred dollars, and of that sum three hundred was the rascal's own cash."

"As it happened there were about all small bills in the pile, fives and tens chiefly; the game had not been a large one, just about the same as usual, or else he would have stood a chance to get away with more cash."

"It was a most narrow escape," she answered.

"Yes, but a miss is as good as a mile and I am worth a dozen dead men."

"But I say, Nell, you are partly to blame for this affair, for if it had not been for you I would not have been in this outlandish place and exposed to such danger."

"It is very true, and I am sorry that your devotion to me came near costing you so dearly," the woman replied, regretfully.

"Oh, well! I am not damaged, you know," he observed.

"And in the future I will take good care that no scoundrel gets another such a chance at me.

"But the very boldness of the scheme insured its success. I have heard of a good many desperate attempts in my time, but this one tonight was ahead of anything that ever came to my knowledge.

"I will be on my guard in the future though, and the trick can't be worked again. Besides, this outrage will undoubtedly rouse the town, and the chances are that the citizens will form some sort of a government and arrange for a police force, so that any outlaws of this kind can be kept in check."

"That would be a good idea," the woman observed.

"Yes, the town is getting too big now to be allowed to run itself, and as this first attempt has succeeded so well, the chances are big that some other scoundrels will go in for something of the same sort.

"But I say, Nell, are you going to keep me in the dark forever in regard to the motives which induced you to come out here? I have faithfully lived up to my agreement, and it seems to me that now we are on the ground, it would be only fair to let me know why you were so anxious to come to this place."

The woman appeared to be buried in deep thought for a few moments, but at last she raised her head which she had allowed to sink upon her bosom, and said:

"Michael, you have indeed been true to your pledge, and I feel that it would be unjust to longer allow you to remain in ignorance.

"The story of our meeting and marriage was more like a romance than sober reality, but what I have to relate is wilder and more unlikely still."

"By Jove! it will have to be odd then, for our story is strange enough," he remarked.

"If it was put into story shape by some writer skilled with the pen, I feel sure that it would prove mighty interesting reading.

"Just call back the circumstances to your mind. I was a gambler in Washington, one of the leading sports of the capital and interested in a couple of the largest gaming-houses in the city.

"You were a clerk in the Treasury Department, the niece of a New York senator, and though you had no money yourself, yet you came of a family that counted their wealth by the millions, and, thanks to your influential connections, you moved in the best society.

"By chance we encountered each other, and with, as I think it was, really a case of love at first sight. I know it was on my part, and although you never admitted it, yet your actions seemed to bear out the idea."

"You were right—I loved you from the moment that my eyes first rested upon your face," the woman said, extending her hand, and with a caressing motion brushing back the hair from the gambler's temple.

"And my love was so great that it forced me to act honestly with you.

"After I had made your acquaintance I told you plainly who and what I was, and you were graciously pleased not to drive me from your presence when you learned of the precarious life I led.

"Urged by your kindness I made bold to woo you, and you consented to marry me provided I would agree to come to this place and settle here for a while—in fact I was to bind myself to obey your orders without question for a year's time, and to assist you to the best of my ability in a certain scheme which you had in view, and I must also pledge myself not to question you in regard to it."

"And you have faithfully kept the compact, and now I will release you from it!" the woman exclaimed.

"You shall know all."

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE STORY.

THERE were a few moments of silence and then the woman spoke:

"Yes, it is your right now to know all, and it would not be treating you justly if I kept you longer in ignorance.

"As you know, I am a strange, odd girl in my ways, and one not likely to have many intimate friends.

"In all my life I have never had but one companion, and she was an orphan girl named Ernestine Gravenstine, who occupied the next desk to me in the Treasury Department.

"As you know, I am an orphan too, and although I have wealthy and influential kindred, yet, until I was obliged by dire necessity to come to Washington and ask their aid, I knew nothing of them, so Ernestine and myself were naturally drawn together, and soon became bosom friends.

"She was as sweet a girl as ever drew the breath of life, and before we had been a year

acquainted she seemed to me to be more a sister than a friend.

"For three years this intimacy kept up, and then there came a sudden interruption.

"It happened during the summer vacation.

"My uncle, the senator, was graciously pleased to invite me to spend a few weeks with him at his magnificent country seat at Long Branch, and, although I would have really preferred to remain with Ernestine and swelter in Washington, yet I knew if I did not accept the invitation so kindly tendered, I should undoubtedly give offense to the man to whom I was indebted for my position, and so I went."

"I little thought as I bade a tearful farewell to my dear friend that it was to be our final parting.

"We corresponded, of course, and the second letter I received from her conveyed the intelligence that she had met a gentleman who professed to be deeply in love with her, and between the lines of her epistle I could easily read that she was strongly affected by the circumstance.

"This was what I had always, feared ever since I learned to know Ernestine.

"She was so beautiful a girl, so attractive in every way that I felt certain some gentleman would become fascinated by her and strive to win her for his own and then I would lose my friend.

"Of course, if she secured a good husband, a man who was worthy of her and who would take care of my pearl, I should have been glad of it, but my constant fear was that as she was only a poor girl, dependent upon the labor of her hands for her daily bread, with her rare beauty, she might attract the attention of some of the birds of prey who are continually on the watch for victims.

"Ernestine's next letter was a complete surprise, for in it she told me she had yielded to the importunities of her suitor and had consented to be married to him that very night."

At this point Daymon shook his head.

"The haste appears ominous to you?" she said.

"Yes, it looks as if there was something wrong about the matter."

"That was my thought at the time.

"In this letter she gave a brief description of the man to whom she had concluded to give herself, and also explained the reason why he was so urgent to have the marriage take place immediately.

"Her intended was a stranger who had been brought to Washington by business and so chanced to encounter her.

"He was called Stephen Bertram, a Frenchman by birth, but as he had been in this country ever since he was a child, beyond his rather peculiar look, he presented no appearance of a foreign origin.

"Bertram was engaged in the cattle business in New Mexico with head-quarters here at El Paso.

"He was very wealthy and had promised that she should live like a queen if she would only consent to share his wild, western home.

"She was a woman—she loved and she consented.

"His business in Washington being ended he was obliged to hurry home and was anxious to carry her with him as a bride.

"It was a beautiful letter and in it I could plainly read that she dearly loved this stranger, who had so unexpectedly come into her life, and was more than willing to accompany him to the wilds of the West.

"She told me not to answer the letter for as she would leave Washington that night my answer would not reach her, but she would write just as soon as she was settled in her new home.

"Time passed on, my vacation came to an end and I returned to Washington, but no letters came from Ernestine.

"I was oppressed by a thousand fears. Something dreadful had occurred to her, I was certain, or else she would surely have written.

"The thought came to me that it was possible that the devoted lover had been transformed into the tyrannical husband and that, for some reason, he objected to her corresponding with me and had put a stop to it, but in my wildest imaginings I never even dreamed of thinking that my friend had been deceived in any way, and had fallen the prey of an unscrupulous adventurer who had been attracted by her beauty."

"Of course your knowledge of the world at the time you speak was limited, and therefore your suspicions were not liable to be aroused. I suspected that there was something wrong about the man from the beginning," the gambler observed.

"But then, you see, that comes from the life I have led.

"Men in our business are not apt to place any trust in other men's statements, particularly when they refer to themselves and to their positions.

"When a fellow says that he is a big gun in the world, and talks about his wealth and influence, we sporting men always set him down for a liar until we ascertain beyond the shadow of a doubt that he is what he claims to be."

"Of course there is a vast difference between

the judgment of an old and experienced man of the world like yourself and that of two ignorant girls such as we were," the woman remarked.

"It was fully six months before I heard a word from my friend, and then, just as I had about given up all hope of ever receiving news of her again—had begun to believe that she had died, and that was the reason why she did not write to me—a letter came, and a terrible letter it was, too!"

"It was written here in El Paso, and it was the heart-breaking cry of a deceived and despairing woman who felt that she was near to death's door.

"The handsome, dashing fellow whom she had married—who had so easily won her young love—was no cattle-raiser, but the desperate chief of an outlaw band, who ranged up and on the Rio Grande in the neighborhood of El Paso.

"She had not been married two weeks before she discovered by accident the horrid truth, although he had taken great pains to keep her in ignorance of his true position.

"She was not wise enough to conceal from him the fact that she had made the fearful discovery, and he, finding that further concealment was useless, threw off the mask.

"And at the time she made the discovery in regard to his true position, she also came in possession of certain facts which led her to believe that she was not the only wife that the dashing Stephen Bertram possessed.

"Her love being turned to disgust when she found how cruelly she had been deceived, she made up her mind to leave the man who had so basely betrayed the confidence which she had reposed in him, and she was unwise enough to tell her betrayer so.

"By so doing she roused his anger and he did not attempt any further concealment, but he admitted bluntly that he was the captain of a gang of outlaws who robbed right and left up and down the Rio Grande.

"When the American authorities got after them the bandits crossed the river and sought refuge on Mexican soil, and when by his depredations the sluggish Mexican officials were roused, it was an easy matter to recross the Rio Grande and on the American bank laugh their efforts to scorn.

"He admitted that he had half-a-dozen wives, and all of them, he said, with as good a claim to him, if not a little better, than herself.

"For, as he declared in utter scorn, what mattered an idle ceremony if there was a pretty woman who could not be won in any other way because she possessed a foolish something which she called a conscience.

"But in regard to her leaving him, he laughed at the idea.

"She suited him and she must remain at the lonely ranch in the hills where she had been brought until he became tired of her or found a new wife who would suit him better and then she would be free to depart.

"For six months she had been kept a close prisoner and it was only by bribing one of the Mexicans employed on the place that she was able to get this letter to the post.

"She implored me to aid her if it were possible, although she feared it was not, for often had the outlaw boasted that not all the power of the United States Government could tear her from him.

"The day after I received this letter you pressed your suit," she said in conclusion, "and I accepted you, for I thought that by your aid I should be able to rescue my unfortunate friend from the dreadful captivity in which she lingers."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DOUBLE LIFE.

AND now that the story was told all was plain to the gambler.

"I see, this was the reason that induced you to persuade me to come to El Paso. You wished to hunt down this villain who had so deceived your friend."

"More than friend—she was like a sister to me!" the woman exclaimed, impulsively.

"Ever since I heard her sad story I have brooded over it until the desire for vengeance has become so strong that sleeping or waking hardly any other thought is in my mind.

"It is on this account that I have followed your fortunes, as few other girls would have dared to do.

"I have learned to use the pistol, rifle, and the knife, until I am more expert at the weapons than the average dweller on the border.

"And in order to discover this outlaw, who, of course, does not walk around in his own proper person, I learned to handle cards so as to be able to act as your dealer.

"That was not difficult though, for I have been an expert whist-player ever since I was fourteen and in the Treasury Department it was the boast of the officials in my division that there wasn't a more nimble-fingered worker in the building than myself.

"The pen portrait which my unfortunate friend drew of the man who so cruelly betrayed her is indelibly imprinted on my mind and I feel sure I will recognize the villain if my eyes ever fall upon him."

"How was he called—did you say?" asked the gambler.

"Bertram—Stephen Bertram."

Daymon shook his head.

"I have never heard of any one by that name since I have been in the town," he said.

"Neither have I and what is more, although I have made cautious inquiries no one in the town to whom I have spoken has ever heard of such a man."

"It is possible, of course," the sport suggested, "that the name was assumed merely for the nonce at Washington and that he has never been known by it out in this region."

"Yes, I thought of that, and I suppose that is the explanation," she observed.

"Then too, as far as I can learn, no band such as she speaks of in her letter as being commanded by this man has ever operated in this locality, although I have heard of at least half-a-dozen who at various times had existed lower down on the Rio Grande."

"I have not heard of any until to-night," the other remarked.

"But now I have visible proof that there is a gang in this neighborhood as bad as any I ever ran across or even heard of in my time," and the gambler made a grimace as he recalled how near to death's door the bullet of the marauder had brought him.

"But none of these men seem to correspond at all with the description which the unfortunate Ernestine gave of the man who deceived her," the woman observed.

"The fellows may have been disguised," Daymon remarked.

"That is true but I hardly think any one of them was the man I seek."

"Then too, although I have inquired of every one likely to have any knowledge on the subject, I cannot gain any intelligence of any lonely ranch up in the hills near this town, such as Ernestine described as the place of her imprisonment."

"Still, that is no proof that it does not exist," the sport remarked.

"A ranch of that kind, used as a headquarters by any such gang as this outlaw band, would be apt to be in such a secluded spot that only by accident would its existence be discovered."

"And then, too, so much care would naturally be taken to make it appear that there wasn't anything out of the way in regard to the ranch that the average man, even though he happened to run across it, would not be apt to give a second thought to the matter."

"That is very true, but now that you have learned my secret, are you willing to give me your aid?" asked the girl, anxiously, and she placed her hand in a caressing manner on the man's shoulder as she put the question.

"Most certainly!" and the sport took her little hand between his own broad palms and pressed it tenderly.

"You have been a good little wife to me and have shared the toils and dangers of my precarious life without a murmur, and in return for the love which you have given me I stand ready to back your quarrel as though it was my own."

Bending over toward him she kissed his forehead affectionately.

"Spoken like my own true husband!" she exclaimed.

"I begin to understand now why you went into this double-life idea," he observed, reflectively.

"It has been a puzzle to me all along, for I couldn't, for the life of me, see what you were up to."

"When I was in Washington flatterers called me beautiful," she said.

"No flattery, you were beautiful and are beautiful still."

"Your wedded life has not robbed you of a single charm."

"My poor Ernestine always raved of my beauty, and in the first letter wherein she relates the particulars of her conquest, she innocently said, 'If you had been here, dear Margaret, my lover, I am sure, would never have taken any notice of me, for he certainly would have been captivated by your royal beauty.'"

"I see, and on that idea you have proceeded."

"Exactly, I put myself in the foreground as a lure—a decoy, thinking I might attract the attention of this villain, and if he attempted to make me his prey I might be able to rescue and avenge the wrongs of the helpless Ernestine."

Upon reading the name of Margaret the careful reader probably guesses the secret.

The masked dealer who handled his cards so deftly at the faro-table in The Royal Road to Fortune was the girl who under the name of Margaret Umberson kept the little store only a few yards away.

A secret, underground passage, running from the rear of the houses, connected the two.

And by means of this passage the girl was able to pass from one house to the other without attracting observation.

She attended to the store all through the day and until a few minutes of eight in the evening, then she retired to the rear apartment, assumed her male attire and mask, passed by the rear passage to the gaming-house, and took her seat

at the table, all ready to play her part in the night's work.

And this explains the mystery.

This was the reason why the masked and mysterious dealer of The Royal Road to Fortune had never been seen outside of the building since the "game" had started.

And so well had this plan worked, so completely different were the double lives led by the girl, that not a soul in the town suspected the truth.

There was only one person besides Daymon who was in the secret, and that was the dwarf, Old Zip Coon, but he was so firmly attached to the gambler, whose man he had been for years, that wild horses wouldn't have drawn the secret from him.

"Yes, yes, all is plain to me now," the sport observed.

"And I must say, the game you have set out to play is an extremely pretty one, and you certainly ought not to fail in catching your bird."

"If he comes into the town with any of his followers, intent upon having a good time, he will be pretty certain to come here, if he arrives in the evening, and if he happens to make his appearance during the day, the chances are great that some one will tell him about the pretty girl who keeps the little shop, and, out of curiosity, he will come in to have a look at you."

"Yes, that is my idea, and when he does make his appearance, I shall do my best to fascinate him!" the girl exclaimed, eagerly.

"Oh, there isn't much doubt about your being able to do that!" Daymon exclaimed, with a laugh.

"If I were inclined to be jealous, I should be on pins and needles about all the time, for whenever I go in the daytime, the young bloods of the town don't seem to have any other subject of conversation but your beautiful self, so there isn't much doubt that this desperado, who rejoiced in a multiplicity of wives, will be certain to wish to add you to the number, if his eyes ever happen to fall upon your face."

Fierce fires shot from the brilliant orbs of the girl, as she reflected upon the probability of such a thing.

"I will ensnare and crush him with as little mercy as I would give to a venomous snake crawling in my path!" she exclaimed.

"I have sworn to devote my life to the task, and I will not swerve from my mission until the end is accomplished—until Ernestine is rescued from the power of this villain, or her death avenged, if she has perished in her dreadful captivity."

"And I will aid you to the best of my power," the sport cried.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LONE RANCH.

AFTER the rescue of their comrade from the clutches of the townsmen the outlaws beat a speedy retreat.

They had played a bold game, and the quickness with which they had acted had insured their success.

But now that the town was aroused there was nothing left for them but to get out of the place as soon as possible for of course it would clearly be impossible for seven men, no matter how desperate—how good fighters or well-armed to contend against the whole town.

All El Paso had been aroused by the fight and the citizens were rushing out of their houses with all sorts of weapons caught up on the spur of the moment, like a lot of bees enraged by the intrusion of a stranger.

The desperadoes had ridden out of the town, heading directly east, and they had been forced to put spurs to their steeds for some of the townsmen were armed with rifles and had opened fire on them in a particularly lively manner.

"Ride for your lives, boys!" the leader exclaimed.

"Some of those fools may have the luck to send a bullet our way and until we get out of range we haven't got any time to spare!"

The outlaws obeyed the injunction and rode onward at a sharp gallop.

Inside of five minutes though all peril was passed and the riders slackened their speed from the fierce pace into a moderate one, making a sharp turn to the north as they did so.

"What do you think, captain, will the galoots come arter us?" asked the burly ruffian who answered to the name of Taos Jack.

"Not much danger," the leader responded.

"In the first place, I don't believe there is a man in the town who can lift the trail on such a night as this, and if there is, it would be mighty slow work and before they could get after us we will be safe in the broken country up the Rio Grande where if we turned and showed fight it would take an army to clean us out."

"Oh, no, these galoots in El Paso will never dare to try that game."

"I say, Cap, that was a mighty big thing to-night," another one of the band remarked.

"Yes, it was a very neat operation, but you know we haven't done anything in this section for quite a time and I kinder wanted to give those El Paso cusses a taste of our quality, and then we are rather short of cash; we are all out

of cartridges and if we hav'n't got powder and balls for our weapons we might about as well go armed with a lot of corn-cobs."

"That's so—that's so!" chorused the band.

"I ran you into this scheme to-night just to whet your appetites for bigger work," the outlaw chief explained.

"There's an express stage due to-morrow afternoon and I shouldn't be surprised if the passengers will be worth going for; at any rate we'll have some fun out of the thing if we don't make a raise worth talking about."

"Thar ain't any doubt about that," Taos Jack observed.

"And I say, captain, tackling these stage-coaches is a good deal like a lottery, or for a feller to go in and buck a faro bank."

"Mebbe you'll catch on to a big thing and mebbe you won't."

"Jack, you'll have to ride over to El Paso the first thing in the morning and get some cartridges and provision," the leader remarked.

"I'll make out a list and you can take a burro along to pack 'em on."

"All right," answered the other.

The desperadoes were now in the midst of a country so rough and broken, and the trail ran so narrow, that the outlaws were forced to proceed in single file, the chief at the head of the party.

In just an hour from the time they left El Paso the outlaws drew rein at a ranch situated in a wild and particularly out-of-the-way spot.

It was an old-time Mexican building built out of 'dobes, as the unburnt bricks common to that part of the country are called.

Apparently it was a sheep ranch, and even one acquainted with the section would not have been apt to suspect that there was anything wrong about it.

Above El Paso the country is decidedly rugged, and it is from the fact that at this point the river cuts through the mountain ranges that the town takes its name El Paso del Norte, or, "The Pass of the North."

The building was built after the usual Mexican fashion in the form of a hollow square with a courtyard in the center.

The roof was flat and arranged so it could be used for a promenade, and in time of trouble could be utilized to afford means to beat off an attacking foe.

This country is in close proximity to "The Apache Land" as the red braves grandiloquently termed the district over which they claim to rule, and in the olden time, before the power of the red-skin was broken by the strong arm of the United States Government, aided by the settlers whom the dusky braves discovered to be an entirely different kind of men from the Mexicans whom they had been accustomed to drive like sheep, the settlers on the border had a hard time to protect themselves against the ruthless, red marauders.

But with the establishment of the posts of Fort Franklin, Davis and Quitman, on the south and the other forts on the north the savages had been held in check, and both the Mexicans and the American settlers had a peaceful time compared to what it used to be when the dusky warriors claimed to own all the territory.

There was a man on guard at the ranch, and he opened the massive doors so that the horsemen could enter.

"Call up the rest and set out what provisions there are in the ranch together with what liquor is left and we will make an end of the stuff and have a night of it."

"We have made a raise and are flush again and to-morrow we lay in a new supply," commanded the leader, as he dismounted and resigned his horse to the care of one of the gang whose business it was to attend to the animals.

The rest followed his example and they all proceeded to the grand hall of the ranch and then they stripped off their disguises.

Every man in the party wore a wig and a false beard, and when these articles were removed the change produced in their appearance was wonderful.

They were all young men, not one over thirty and were fair specimens of the average borderer.

The "feast" was spread, all sorts of odds and ends, for the party had been driven up from the lower Rio Grande by a determined action on the part of both the American and Mexican authorities and as they had not been expected by the men in charge of the ranch no preparations had been made for them and they were obliged to put up with what provision happened to be on hand until there was an opportunity to procure a fresh supply.

Thanks to the raid on The Royal Road to Fortune, which had resulted so fortunately, they were in condition to replenish their larder.

The outlaws sat down and feasted, enjoying the coarse fare with the appetite of hungry men.

They had ridden fifty miles that day and this was the first time they had broken their fast since the noonday meal.

The meal ended, and the hungry men having eat everything up clean, buffalo-robbers were produced and the tired outlaws camped in the main hall, for although there were rooms enough in

the house, yet there was very little furniture in the place.

Inside of ten minutes every soul in the place with the exception of the watchman was buried in slumber.

Bright and early in the morning the outlaws were astir.

A frugal breakfast was made out of some roast mutton and "hard tack," all that was left in the house and then Taos Jack accompanied by Red Jose and a burro, as the diminutive Mexican jackass is called, departed for El Paso, the old Mexican town of that name, not the straggling American settlement which had grown up on the east bank of the river, the child of the railroad so fast approaching.

In El Paso, which for over a hundred years has been the market for the surrounding country, the outlaw messengers provided a plentiful supply of provisions, dealing with an "honest" Hebrew, who did not scruple when he had a good opportunity, and he thought there wasn't any danger of detection—to exchange his wares—provisions, cartridges, powder and shot and bullets—for any valuable articles that his visitors might happen to have, without being particular to inquire as to the manner in which they became possessed of the aforesaid.

With a full supply of the articles required, not neglecting a good supply of the celebrated "Pass" onions, almost as big round as a man's head, and the "Pass" wine, which is very good tippie, indeed, the messengers made their way back to the lone ranch.

A jolly dinner the outlaws had, and then the chief gave the command:

"Boots and saddles, boys, there's work ahead!"

CHAPTER X.

THE TOLL-GATHERERS.

At the time of which we write the two principal roads into the new town of El Paso—the mushroom-like village that the near approach of the railroad across the Texas plains had caused to spring into existence on the American bank of the Rio Grande, were from the north and south, following the course of the river, for few travelers care to dare the discomforts of the long journey across the Texan plain.

The majority of the new-comers found their way into the "booming" town by the way of the north road, the restless adventurers in Colorado being attracted southward by the reports that there was a fine opening for business in the new town, which the leading spirits, who had been instrumental in founding the place, declared was bound to be the big city of the Rio Grande the moment the railroad got through.

At El Paso connection was to be made with the Mexican system of iron roads, running straight to the Mexican capital, and it really seemed as if there was a good prospect that El Paso would in time be a large place.

It was on the afternoon of the same day that the events described in our last chapter took place. A stage-coach was making good time along the tolerably good road leading into El Paso from the north.

The road follows the course of the river, and a little way above the town, the Rio Grande cuts its way through the foothills of the Sierra Madre range on one hand, and the Soledad mountains on the other.

The country at the point where the river cuts its way around the mountain chains is a rough and broken one, quite a contrast to the sandy plains above and below.

Twenty miles from El Paso the trail winds through a little glade, broken here and there with trees and clumps of bushes.

Beneath the shade of one of the trees, and rather skulking behind it as though he shrunk from observation, was the figure of a man; a horse was at his back, the bridle-rein passed over his arm.

The man was listening intently.

A huge, black beard covered the lower part of his face, a rubber cloth poncho half hid his person, and in one hand he held a black half-mask.

"Come, come! hurry up and don't keep the toll-gatherer waiting!" cried the outlaw chief, for it was the road-agent leader on the watch for prey.

Hardly had he spoken, when the distant rumble of the coach's wheels fell upon his ears.

He hastened into the bushes, and then the stage appeared.

On this occasion it was occupied by a jolly party.

It was an extra stage, not the regular one, and had been chartered expressly for this journey by the party who were on board.

One of the best drivers on the line occupied the box, a tall, wiry, raw-boned specimen of humanity, who was called James Johnson, but was better known all up and down the Rio Grande as Slim Jim.

It was an important lot of passengers that had been placed in his charge during this trip, and he felt proud of the responsibility, and then, too, they had treated him like a prince.

There were four gentlemen in the coach, all well dressed, all "tenderfoots," to use the common term applied by the "acclimated" citizens of the far West to all new-comers from the East.

Important "freight" and no mistake were these strangers.

First there was General Benjamin Bagshot, president of the new railroad which was so rapidly approaching the banks of the Rio Grande, and one of the most important transportation magnates in the country.

The general was well along in years, but showed few traces of it, aside from the fact that his hair and long, full beard were thickly streaked with gray; for he had a round, rosy face, and looked like a man at peace with himself and all the world. He was short in stature, but made up for it by being extremely stout.

Few, to look at this man, in ignorance of who and what he was, would be apt to suspect that in business matters he was as merciless as a tiger and crushed without the least compunction any unfortunate men who chanced to be in his way.

The general occupied one of the back seats, and opposite to him sat his secretary, a broad-shouldered, muscular fellow, who looked to be strong enough to fell an ox.

The railroad king was never seen abroad without being accompanied by his muscular secretary, and the world said that Thomas Jefferson Jones, as he was called, would never have secured the position he held if it had not been for his surprising muscular development, and that he always accompanied the general so as to serve as a body-guard, for, once in a while, men who had been ruined by the great railroad king's sudden moves became desperate and inclined to call the general to a personal account.

By the general's side sat a little, short, slim fellow, with fiery-red hair and a beard of the same hue, and a general expression on his countenance that immediately suggested a fox.

This was Senator Ephiram Doolittle, of Nevada, one of the silver kings, supposed to be a millionaire a dozen times over, and very heavily interested in this new Pacific road.

Opposite to the senator sat a tall, raw-boned, middle-aged man, with the long, oval face and high cheek-bones peculiar to the men of the Southwest.

This was Judge Antony Poindexter, of Louisiana, counsel to the railroad, and its principal financial man.

The party had come down the Rio Grande on an inspection tour.

They wished to see for themselves how the railroad was getting along, and then, too, a trustworthy satellite had brought them word that there was a good chance to invest some money in the neighborhood of the new town, and they had made up their minds to examine the ground.

It was a very jolly party, as we have said.

The swing seat, which usually occupies the center of the coach, had been removed, and a hamper full of provision, both eatable and drinkable, occupied the space.

"What was that remark that the Governor of North Carolina made to the Governor of South Carolina?" exclaimed the general, abruptly, when there came a pause in the conversation about everything in general, and nothing in particular, which was being carried on.

"It's a long time between drinks!" exclaimed Poindexter, who bore the reputation at home of being able to drink more whisky, and show it less, than any man in the State of Louisiana.

"Exactly, and a remark both extremely wise and witty!" the general cried.

"Thomas Jefferson, make yourself useful as well as ornamental, and get out a bottle of champagne!"

"I seldom drink," remarked Judge Doolittle, with a solemn face, "but when I do it is always just about this time."

And then there was an explosion of laughter at this well-worn joke.

The secretary made a dive into the hamper, produced a bottle of champagne, a corkscrew, and four glasses.

"Five, my boy—five, Thomas Jefferson; don't forget our worthy driver," said the general, as he noticed that the secretary had only got out four glasses.

"It is not often that he gets a chance to astonish his stomach with a little good champagne and himself by drinking in the society of gentlemen," the general added.

Another glass was immediately produced. The cork being dexterously removed and the glasses filled with the sparkling liquor, the driver was hailed and requested to pull up, and when he came to a stop a glass of champagne was put into his fist by the secretary, and the general, looking out of the window, said:

"Driver, we have made up our minds to get you as full as a tick before you reach El Paso, so be warned in time and mind your eye."

"Much obliged, gents!" exclaimed Slim Jim, as he swallowed the contents of the glass at a draught and smacked his lips.

"Get me drunk and have some fun with me; but I say, gents, you will have to pour some other p'ison inter me than this hyer cider that the tumbler-juggler up the creek palmed off on you for champagne."

There was a laugh at this at Poindexter's expense, for it was the lawyer who had selected the wine.

"Ho, ho, ho!" roared the general.

"I tell you what it is, Poindexter—don't ever pretend to be a judge of wine after this. Ha, ha, ha! Cider! Well, now, that is really the richest joke of the season."

"We must have another round on the strength of it."

The glasses were duly filled, and then the general exclaimed:

"Now, gentlemen, I will give you a toast: Here's to Poindexter's cider!"

Amid general merriment, in which the Southern lawyer joined as heartily as any of the rest of the party, the glasses were emptied.

The driver, with a "thank ye," passed down his glass and took up the reins; but before he could start the horses in motion again, out into the road, surrounding the coach on all sides, came six well-armed men, four of them on horseback.

And no man who has ever traveled on the Western plains ever beheld a stranger disguise than these men wore.

Each and every man wore a poncho, as the square blanket, borrowed from the Mexicans, with the hole in the center through which the head passes is called.

A broad-brimmed slouch hat was pulled down low over each forehead, a black mask concealed the upper part of the face, and the lower was hidden by a huge black beard.

Black as night, and which gave a strange, unearthly appearance to the riders.

CHAPTER XI.

THE OUTLAW'S DEMAND.

THE horsemen were armed with repeating-rifles, the footmen with revolvers, and the surprise had been effected so quickly that almost before they knew what had happened, the passengers found that they were covered by the road-agents.

Of course there wasn't the least doubt in the minds of any of the coach party as to who and what the new-comers were.

They had fallen into a trap, and one which they had not in the least anticipated.

All of the passengers were armed, and two of them had a local reputation as fighters in their own section.

Poindexter had been concerned in a half a dozen desperate affrays, and each and every time he had succeeded in getting the best of the fight.

He was an expert shot with pistol, rifle, and that favorite Southern weapon, the double-barreled shot-gun.

Was "reckoned" to be "right handy" in drawing his weapon, too, when the circumstances were such that a man's life's depended upon his quickness, but on this occasion he was taken completely at a disadvantage.

T. Jefferson Jones, too, as he was wont to sign himself, was, to use the Westernism, "no slouch" when it came to getting a weapon out in a hurry.

"He was from Texas originally, and in his young manhood had had his share of shooting-scrapes, but what chance did the most expert fellow in this line have when the surprise was so complete?"

And the moment the passengers realized what had happened they understood that the affair had been skillfully planned.

Two men rode out into the road from behind a convenient clump of pines, about fifty feet in advance of the coach, so as to block all onward progress.

Two more made their appearance in the rear of the stage, and at the same distance from it as the first two.

Then the third pair of road-agents came out of the bushes right by the side of the coach, one on the right, another on the left, and these were the two who were on foot.

"Slim Jim, don't take a pull onto those lines for to start them horses if you set any value on yer carcass!" cried one of the disguised men who blocked the road in advance of the stage.

"Gents, take it easy," remarked the outlaw who approached the coach from the right-hand side.

"And if ye can't take it easy, take it as easy as ye can."

"And don't let any foolish notion that it is going to do any one of you any good for to show fight get inter yer noddles, 'cos we are on it ourselves, bigger'n a wolf, and as we have got the drop on you in the worst kind of way, you better play Cap'n Scott's coon and come down, gracefully."

The passengers stared at each other and then they stared at the outlaws.

There was no gainsaying the truth of the speech, though; they were in a tight place, and no mistake.

"Got yer tickets, gents?" continued the outlaw, in a business-like way.

"Tickets?" said the general, taking it upon himself to be spokesman for the rest.

"What tickets?"

"For to pass over this road."

"We were not aware that any were needed."

"I've driv this hyar road a year, and this is the fu'st time I ever heered anything 'bout tickets!" the stage-driver declared.

"Slim Jim, you have too much mouth on you, and we will have to be under the disagreeable necessity of shooting part of it off if you don't have better sense than to open your head and stick in your ear when yer betters are talking!" cried the masked man on the right of the coach, who was evidently the chief of the gang.

"If you gents hav'n't got tickets, mebbe you have a pass."

"Oh, yes, on the Southern Pacific railroad, if that is any good," replied the general who could not refrain from being humorous even in this ticklish position.

"Why if it isn't General Bagshot!" the road-agent exclaimed at this point, suddenly pretending to recognize the railroad magnate. "Why Ben, old boy, how are you? Darn my cats! if I ain't glad to see you!"

"Your blamed old railroad is jest a-booming things up in this section, I tell yer!"

And then casting his sharp eyes, which gleamed dark and sinister through the holes of the masks, in succession upon the other members of the party he called them all by name, much to their surprise.

"Why, Senator—old man Doolittle, how are you? Are you mixed up in this railroad too? It will go through then for sure, for you turn every thing into gold that you touch."

"And are you thar, Tony Poindexter? How do you flourish? Do you drink as much whisky now as you used to?"

"Oho, ho! didn't you use to punish the fire-water in the old days, eh?"

"And Thomas Jefferson is to the front, I see. Are you as much on the fight as ever? Who was the last man you whaled? Is there more money in playing secretary and fighting man to a bloated monopolist than in running a skin-faro game as you used to afore you got into this hyer soft job?"

The passengers looked at each other, each man decidedly displeased at the personal remarks and yet not exactly knowing how to retaliate under the circumstances.

"But come, we are losing time," the outlaw continued.

"We have a heap of business on hand and we ain't got any minutes to fool away."

"I s'pose you gents understand what our leetle game is? We are the tax-collectors on this hyer road and if you haven't got any tickets for to let you over the trail you'll have to shell out to us, unless you have the signature of the superintendent to a free pass."

"We really must plead ignorance of the fact that this was a toll-road," the railroad king remarked. "If we had known it we would have made provision."

"But where can these tickets you speak of be procured and what is the name of your superintendent?"

"Black Blaze—that is his handle, and when you meet him you will know him by his big black beard—handsom' ha'r jest like ourn!"

"But in regard to tickets—that is all right."

"If you found the chief and ax him for one he would jist charge you all the valuables you had about yer clothes and we won't take any more, so shell out and don't keep us waiting."

"General, you are the biggest gun in the party so you pass out your plunder first; be lively and jist bear in mind that we have got you kivered, and if you try any kicking, we'll slap a hole inter yer so quick that you'll think you'd been run inter by one of yer own bullgines."

"Oh, but I say this is altogether too rough a deal!" the railroad magnate protested.

"Not by a durned sight; 'tain't half as bad as the way you twist the life out of some of the unfortunate galoots who are unlucky enough to buck ag'in' you in the stock market."

"Come, come, shell out!"

"You kin bet yer bottom dollars that from this time out nobody will go over this road without paying toll unless thar's a reg'lar army of 'em, and then I reckon they will have a right smart chance to fight their way through, for we are the Black Beards of Black Blaze and we kinder think we own this road, we do!"

There was no help for it; the passengers were in the toils and they saw no way to avoid complying with the demands of the road-agents.

Such an encounter was entirely unexpected, for this was the first time that any stage had ever been stopped on this road.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, for every man in the party was "well-beeled" as far as money was concerned, and all too wore valuable watches and jewelry.

"Come, shell out lively, gents; don't keep the tax-gatherers waiting!" exclaimed the outlaw.

"You sharps want to jest remember the words of the Gospel sport, 'bout how the 'Lord loves a cheerful giver.'"

"Shell out then and be durned quick about it too."

And seeing no way of getting out of it, the passengers *did* shell out.

The road-agent was provided with a "grip-sack," as he termed it, a small, black bag, and he held it forward in one hand for the passengers to put their valuables in while the other menaced them with the revolver.

Wallets, watches and chains, pins and revolvers all went into the bag.

It was a rich haul.

Altogether there was a good two thousand dollars' worth of booty.

When the passengers were completely stripped, the road-agent opened the general's wallet and took out of it four fifty-dollar bills.

"Hyar's fifty apiece for you fellers until you kin raise a stake to git you out," he said as he delivered the bills.

"And now, so-long and don't forget to give the compliments of Black Blaze and his band of Black Beards to the boys in El Paso!"

"Drive on with yer hearse!"

Slim Jim obeyed.

The "picnic" was over.

CHAPTER XII.

RAMON THE SPORT.

THE news of this bold outrage, coming so quickly on the heels of the successful robbery at The Royal Road to Fortune saloon, produced the most intense excitement in the town of El Paso for it seemed to show that a desperate band of villains had taken up their quarters in the neighborhood for the purpose of preying upon the citizens of the booming town.

There wasn't the least doubt in the minds of any one that the ruffians who committed the bold robbery in the saloon were the same band who, disguised as the Black Beards, had "looted" the stage.

The railroad magnates arrived at El Paso in a furious state of excitement.

The more they reflected on the outrage which had been committed, the more enraged they became.

A mass meeting was called and the citizens resolved that at any cost the robbers must be hunted down.

The first thing to be done was to organize a town government, and it was resolved to hold an election on the morrow to choose a mayor and town marshal, upon whom would devolve the raising of a police force, so that in the future no band of marauders would be able to ride into the town, secure plunder and get off scot-free.

The railroad magnates made speeches reciting the necessity of stamping out such lawlessness without delay, and all expressed their readiness to "chip in" to aid El Paso in securing a good, stable government, if money would be of service.

The election was held and Buck Kleppleman, one of the oldest sports in the town was elected mayor, and our hero, the High Horse, despite his protests that he wasn't anxious for the honor, was made marshal.

The big stranger had made such a favorable impression on the townsmen by the promptness with which he had "gone for" the outlaws on the night of the disturbance in Daymon's saloon that they would not hear of his declining the office.

Goldlace's first move was to raise a police force, consisting of six good men.

With that number he felt confident he could "handle" any ruffians who might come into El Paso with the idea of "running the town."

A band of rangers were also organized with the idea of hunting down the road-agents if they had a lair amid the recesses of the neighboring mountain ranges.

But nothing was accomplished.

If the road-agents had a haunt in the mountains the approach to it was so carefully guarded that the closest search did not succeed in discovering its whereabouts.

And as nothing more was heard of the outlaws in a week or so the town regained its usual quietude.

The general and his party being pleased with the prospect had resolved to invest in town lots and were busy with plans looking to the improvement of the property which they designed to buy.

Nothing of interest had occurred to any of the characters of our story, except that the sport, Daymon, and his mysterious dealer, the woman who had come to the wilds of the West in search of vengeance, were satisfied that in Black Blaze, the leader of the road-agents, who had stopped the coach containing the railroad men, was the man whom Margaret Umberson sought, and since he had appeared in the neighborhood, the woman was full of hope that she would soon be able to get upon his trail.

Just at this time a new-comer made his appearance in the town, who excited considerable attention.

He was a man of thirty or thereabouts, a tall, handsome, dashing-looking fellow, with a swarthy face and a soldier-like air.

The name he gave was Ramon Estevan; a Spanish-Mexican by birth, but having been reared on the frontier, he spoke English like a native.

He had served in the Mexican army, but becoming tired of the service, had thrown up his commission and wandered up the Rio Grande, seeking a good chance to invest the money which he had saved from the wreck of his once handsome fortune, for he made no scruples in stating that he had once thrown away money like it was so much water that could be had for the asking;

but now he had discovered that, no matter how good a man's bank account might be, if he continually drew money out without putting any in the end would surely come some day.

Not being fitted by nature or education to make money in trade, the adventurer was somewhat puzzled to know just exactly what he should do.

But in the hotel, one evening, the conversation turned upon the vast sums which were being realized by the men who had taken advantage of the free pasturage offered by the plains and gone into sheep and cattle-raising.

This immediately suggested an occupation to the young Mexican—one that a gentleman could follow, and yet would be productive of lucrative results—and so he invested in a ranch in the neighborhood of El Paso.

He was a new-comer, but by his genial, affable ways, produced a good impression from the beginning.

He had selected the Great Pacific Hotel for his headquarters, and as he had, in the frank and open-hearted manner peculiar to most of the young men of the old Spanish-Mexican race, taken the landlord into his confidence and explained to him exactly how he stood, Goselton had a high opinion of the young man, although he possessed serious doubts as to whether he would ever make a fortune in the cattle business.

The careless way in which the young man carried himself was what made Goselton have misgivings in regard to his financial success.

He was free with his money and never took a drink at the bar without asking all within the room to join him.

And as soon as this peculiarity of the dashing stranger became known, every thirsty fellow in the room made it a point to be on hand whenever the "Mexican Don," as he was generally termed, made his appearance.

Goselton, although this peculiarity of the young man brought money into his pocket, could not bear to see the stranger imposed upon and took it upon himself to remonstrate.

"Say, you are really throwing yer money away for to set up drinks for the gang the way you do!" he exclaimed.

"I wouldn't do it! The gang are getting the grand laugh on yer and pretty soon the mob will be shouting 'round town that the boys are playing you for a sucker.'"

But the young fellow only laughed at this warning.

"Poor devils! they are thirsty and no doubt need the liquor."

"Any of them would do as much for me."

The old hotel-keeper shook his head at this reply, for long experience had taught him that the veteran bummers whose principal occupation was to hang around saloons with the idea of being "treated" never repaid the obligation if they could possibly avoid it.

Then, too, another fact about the young stranger made the host doubtful in regard to his succeeding in his ranch enterprise.

Don Ramon was fond of a social game of cards, and as such games are not played for "fun" on the frontier, a money stake of more or less value being always an adjunct, "just to make the game interesting," Goselton thought there was a good prospect that the card sharps of the town would succeed in the long run in getting possession of all the young man's money.

It was true that Ramon apparently played for amusement only and never bet high, but when a man begins this sort of thing there is no telling where he will stop.

The landlord, influenced by his liking for the young man, had even gone so far out of his way, as to warn him that the "gentlemen" who so kindly invited him to join in their little game, "to pass the time away" were, as far as cards were concerned, "skins from Skinnerville," and what they didn't know about handling the "paste-boards" wasn't worth knowing.

But the stranger only laughed—said he "reckoned" he knew a thing or two about cards himself and if any one got ahead of him in "a friendly game" he must rise early in the morning.

Of course, when a man talks in this "fool fashion," as Goselton would have termed it if he put his thoughts into words, it is no use for any one to waste time in advising him.

The man who can't play, but thanks he can, is not to be driven from his belief by any words of counsel.

"They'll ketch him some night for all he's worth and skin the very life out of him," the saloon-keeper muttered, as he witnessed the young man join the party of poker-players in the private room at the back of the saloon, not an hour after the time when Goselton had attempted to warn him of the danger into which he seemed to be so carelessly drifting.

"He's jest meat for sich sharps as those galoots, but he's too much of a tenderfoot to know it."

"And he thinks he's a match for 'em, too!" and the old man groaned at the idea.

But for all his lack of skill, Dan Ramon had not suffered materially so far, for he was a cautious player and did not risk his money without holding a strong hand.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MEETING.

It was just about two weeks from the time that Dan Ramon made his first appearance in the town of El Paso that he encountered the disguised woman who, under the name of Margaret Umberson was so intent on the path of vengeance.

He had ridden into El Paso about five in the afternoon.

And just at the time of his arrival there was a dispute between two citizens, both of whom were decidedly the worse for liquor, right in front of the shanty occupied by the disguised woman.

The altercation between the two was fiercely conducted, and the threats uttered by them were truly blood-curdling.

Any one listening to the discussion, not acquainted with the men, would have been certain that they intended to do each other mutual harm, but the friends of the two knew better for a pair of greater cowards could not have been found in the town.

After abusing each other until they were out of breath, the two separated, each man breathing dire threats of what he would do to the other upon the first convenient opportunity.

Attracted by the noise, Margaret had come to her door to see what was the matter, and upon perceiving that it was merely a street squabble between two men, both of whom were in liquor, she had retired again to the recesses of her domain.

But during this brief appearance the eyes of Ramon Estevan had fallen upon her beautiful face, and he sat upon his horse like a man spell-bound and watched her until she retired.

She was unconscious of the scrutiny, as the young man had reined in his horse some distance down the street, for at the beginning it had appeared as though these enraged citizens were going to slaughter each other without mercy.

The woman had merely appeared in the doorway, glanced at the men and then when they began to abuse each other, withdrew so that she would not be compelled to listen to their coarse language.

The moment the eyes of the young man fell upon the face of the woman an expression of astonishment came over his features.

"Where in the name of all that is wonderful did that beautiful creature come from?" he exclaimed.

"Well, this is a surprise and one that is entirely unexpected," he continued, communing with himself.

"So far as I have seen, the ladies who have taken up their quarters in this booming town are not particularly attractive, but this one is certainly beautiful enough to catch the fancy of almost any man, and I must make her acquaintance."

Having come to this resolution the horseman paid no more attention to the brawling fellows in the street, but rode directly to the hotel, put his horse up and then entered into conversation with the landlord with the idea of finding out all the particulars in regard to the unknown beauty.

Of course no man in El Paso knew any more about her than Goselton, and Don Ramon was soon in possession of the facts of the case.

"She is a beautiful creature!" the young man exclaimed when the landlord had finished his explanation.

"It is a wonder to me that some of the bloods of the town have not captured her before this."

"Oh, bless you! there is twenty or thirty of the galoots, young and old, who have tried that game, but nary one of 'em could make it work," the landlord replied.

"She ain't one of the kind of gals w'ot seems to care for fellers."

"She is polite to 'em, and all that, but she has got a kind of a way with her that seems to keep the boys at arm's length."

"Thar ain't no nonsense 'bout her and she kinder puts a stopper on the boys when they try to come any soft talk 'round her. She won't have it, nohow!"

"A remarkable girl, as girls go nowadays," was Don Raymon's comment and here the conversation ended.

The young rancher had acquired the information he wanted, and after a while he sauntered out of the hotel and made his way straight to the little shop kept by the beautiful girl.

He strolled along as if with no particular purpose in view and when he came to the shanty halted at the window as though his gaze had been attracted by a plate of apples which were displayed therein.

Apples at the time of which we write were not common in the town and commanded twenty-five cents apiece and so it was not strange that a plateful of good fruit should attract attention.

After examining the apples in a critical sort of way for a moment, the young man walked into the store.

The woman advanced to wait upon him, scrutinizing the young man closely as she did so, although apparently not paying any particular attention to him.

"Good-day, miss," he said, raising his hat, gallantly.

"You have some fine apples in the window—what are they worth?"

"Twenty-five cents apiece, or five for a dollar," she answered.

"I will take a dollar's worth," and as he spoke he drew out a roll of bills from his pocket, and running them over, selected one from the rest.

"I believe a twenty-dollar note is the lowest I have," he remarked.

"I am afraid I will not be able to change so large a bill," she observed as she drew out her wallet and examined the contents.

"I will get it changed at the hotel," Don Ramon replied, picking up the bill and making a movement toward the door.

"Oh, you need not put yourself to that trouble now!" she exclaimed.

"There isn't any necessity for haste, any time will do. You can give me the dollar whenever you happen to have it and it is convenient for you to stop in."

"Well, it is a good thing to have credit," he observed, laughingly, while he picked up the twenty-dollar note which he had laid upon the counter and replaced it in the roll.

"But still don't you think that you are rather incautious in giving credit to a perfect stranger like myself?"

"Many men in these frontier towns are mere birds of passage, here to-day and gone to-morrow."

"Oh, I am not at all afraid!" she replied with a confident air.

"And although you are a stranger to me I am sure you are too much of a gentleman to cheat me out of such a paltry sum of money."

"You are right there, and you will find that your confidence is not misplaced."

"But that reminds me that you don't know who I am yet, and as I am going to be in your debt you ought to know."

"My name is Ramon Estevan, and I have a stock ranch a few miles from El Paso, and although I am not exactly making my fortune in that line now, yet I have great hopes of making a strike one of these days."

"And now, may I ask how you are called—I know that it isn't any of my business, and you will probably consider me an impudent fellow," he hastened to add.

"And the only excuse I have for my curiosity is that I have taken an interest in you, for I presume that you, like myself, are a stranger in this region."

"Oh, I don't see any reason why I should feel offended," she responded, pleasantly.

"Your curiosity is only natural under the circumstances, for I know that it is not usual for a woman to be found alone and unprotected, attempting to gain her own living in such a wild country as this."

"But, under the circumstances there wasn't anything else for me to do, and as long as I conduct myself in a proper manner, I think I should be allowed to do my best to get my bread."

"Most certainly, and as long as I remain in the neighborhood of El Paso you may depend upon me if you are ever in want of a friend," Don Ramon exclaimed, warmly.

"Thank you; you are very kind, and I assure you I fully appreciate it," and the woman became a little confused, as though she feared she had said too much.

"Don't mention it, I beg," the gentleman hastened to exclaim.

"Any gentleman ought to be proud at an opportunity to assist a lady."

"My name is Margaret Umberson, and, being all alone in the world, I have to depend upon myself as I have no friends, excepting a faithful dwarf, who has elected to follow my fortunes."

"From this time forth count Ramon Estevan your friend, and do not hesitate to call upon him freely if you need his services!" the young man exclaimed.

With downcast eyes, as though confused by the generous offer, the girl responded in suitable words, and then the young man took his departure.

But the moment he was out of sight there was a complete change in her countenance.

A fierce light shone in her eyes, and she exclaimed:

"It is my man at last, and he walks blindly into the trap."

CHAPTER XIV.

A LITTLE GAME.

AND on his part, the gentleman appeared to be as well pleased at the result of the interview as the lady.

"She is a deuced pretty girl," he remarked, as he walked toward the hotel, twisting the ends of his long mustache complacently.

"Yes, as pretty a woman as I have run across for many a long day, and I feel sure will be well worth the winning."

"She is one woman picked out of ten thousand, too, or else my judgment is at fault, for there is a spirit and a dash about her that are as rare as they are desirable."

"A glorious creature and no mistake! She must be mine, no matter how difficult the task

to win her may be; but I do not, however, think there will be much trouble about that, judging from the progress I made in this first interview."

"And this was the girl, too, so shy and so reserved that not one of the sharps of the town could make any impression on her," and he laughed outright as he spoke.

"But that was because they didn't know how to go to work in the right way."

"Every woman in this world is to be won by some man who understands how to win her," so some ancient sharp said, and there isn't any mistake about that; a truer sentence was never uttered.

"Now, I must play my game cautiously, not attempt to force the matter along too quickly, and in time I can carry her off, to cheer me in my solitary hours on the old ranch where I seek to acquire a fortune by honest toil."

And then the young man laughed in a peculiar manner.

"By Jove! as far as I can see, the quickest way to wealth lies through the card-table."

"A single lucky night at the poker-table would pay a man more money than he could hope to gain by a whole year's toil at a regular business."

By the time that he had come to this conclusion he had again entered the hotel, and the landlord, perceiving his entrance, beckoned him mysteriously to one side.

"Going to try any poker to-night?" asked Goselton, in a low tone, and taking particular care that his words should not be overheard.

"Well, I don't exactly know," replied Don Ramon, slowly, as though he was debating the subject in his mind.

"Hav'n't won much at poker, have ye?"

"No, not much; but then I hav'n't lost anything, so I suppose I hav'n't any right to complain."

"I play merely to pass the time away, and if I don't have to pay too expensively for the amusement, I presume I ought to be satisfied."

"There's going to be a big game to-night," the host observed, in a very knowing way.

"Is that so?"

"True as preaching!"

"Well, I suppose that the bigger the game the greater the amusement."

"These railroad men are going to take a hack at it, so I heered."

"That will be apt to make it interesting."

"Well, now, you would be safe in betting your bottom dollar on that!" the saloon-keeper exclaimed.

"How did you happen to hear of it?"

"Oh, jest by chance I overheard 'em talking about it awhile ago, and they allowed that as they had got their business in pretty good running order, they could afford to have a leetle fun, and one of 'em—it was that shark of a senator from Nevada, suggested it would be a good idea to ring in on the poker party to-night, and try and see if they couldn't astonish the boys."

"Well, I reckon the boys will be glad to have them, for money is what makes the game go and these railroad kings have got the stamps if they choose to sling them out," the young man remarked.

"Oh, there will not be any hanging back on their part, I'm sart'in of that!" the old man declared.

"I know from the way they talked that they are all in for a big game whenever they tackle the beards."

"Why, it would have almost made your hair stand on end if you had heard 'em reel off their yarns to-day of the big games that they had been in."

"These galoots think no more of putting up twenty or thirty thousand dollars on a hand than an ordinary player would of risking fifty checks, and mebbe too, they would sling out a fortune on keards that most men would be afeard to risk over a hundred dollars on."

"A hundred dollars is a great deal of money to a man that hasn't got much," the other observed.

"Oh yes, no mistake about it, and that is the reason why I wanted to let you into this deal to-night," the host explained.

"Of course, I don't know how you are fixed, but I reckon you hav'n't got sand enough in your pockets to hold up your end when men are going to raise you a thousand or two dollars at every lick, no matter how much you have got in you craw."

"But they can't play that game, you know, unless they play by themselves; we hav'n't got any railroad millionaires in our poker-party and they could clean out the whole gang without any trouble if they are going to raise us out of our boots every chance they get."

"No, no, they couldn't do that; we must have a sight for our money, as much as we can raise, you know, or else they wouldn't be the ghost of a show for us."

"Will you go into the game?" Goselton asked, rather astonished that his warning had not produced the result which he had anticipated.

"Most certainly!" Don Ramon answered, immediately.

"Why, it wouldn't do for me to miss such a chance as this."

"These railroad kings may be the best players in the world and then again they may not be."

"One thing is certain though: they have got the rocks to back their game, and I have an idea that no matter whether they are good or bad players they will be apt to back their game in the most liberal manner."

"Now then, suppose that it turns out that these men are only ordinary players, don't you see what a chance it will be for our boys to gobble some of their wealth?"

This view of the situation had not before occurred to the landlord, but when he came to reflect upon the matter he saw that the calculation had been shrewdly made.

"Well, now you come to speak of it, I don't know but what you are right," Goslton admitted.

"If they go in for to back their game one half as big as they talk, and then should turn out to be only ordinary players, the boys would all pick up small fortunes."

"I'm glad you told me, for now I will have a chance to ride out to the ranch and heel myself."

"When it comes to a big game like this, the more ducats a man has on his side the better it is for him. So I'm off."

And then, after again thanking the landlord for his kindly warning, Don Ramon mounted his horse and rode away.

Goslton did not exactly know what to make of it.

The young man talked all right, but as he had always played a quiet, cautious game, it did not seem possible that he had the nerve to meet these big betters and expect to be able to hold his own.

"I like the young feller," the landlord observed as he watched Don Ramon ride away.

"And I hope to Heaven that he knows what he's about, for if he should go in and get skinned by those railroad sharps, I should feel mighty bad about it."

When night came on Goslton watched for the return of the young man, but as the hours flew rapidly by and he did not make his appearance, the landlord finally came to the conclusion that on his homeward ride he had reflected upon the matter, and had come to the determination not to take part in the big game.

"I reckon that his head is screwed on about right, after all," the old man muttered. "For though he talked the thing over pretty well, it is my opinion that he ain't got no business in any such game as these hyer sharps will be apt to play to-night."

The landlord was wrong in his anticipations, however, for about ten o'clock, just as the poker party was forming in the back room, Don Ramon made his appearance.

The three railroad men, General Bagshot, Senator Doolittle and "Tony" Poindexter, were there together with Buck Kleppleman, the landlord himself, and Moses Goldstein, the principal storekeeper of the town.

Ramon was introduced to the "tenderfoots," and then the party sat down to play.

After a few hands had passed, it became apparent that the strangers were mighty men at cards, and able to hold their own in almost any "coterie."

By midnight the game began to grow interesting. Moses and the landlord were "bustled" and drew out, while Don Ramon was far ahead on the winning side.

CHAPTER XV.

A BIG GAME.

On this particular night Don Ramon played a far bolder game than any of his associates had witnessed him do before, and yet he did not seem to be reckless in his movements either.

The railroad kings were disgusted.

One and all of them prided themselves on the particularly strong game which they played, and the idea that this Mexican Don—as in their heart of hearts they contemptuously dubbed Ramon Estevan—should be able not only to hold his own but to gain an advantage over them was supremely annoying.

Another hour passed.

The veteran sport, Kleppleman, had got all he wanted and dropped out of the game, alleging as an excuse that he was tired and wanted to get to bed.

So of the El Paso men, Don Ramon was alone left to uphold the credit of the town.

But he was proving himself to be a doughty champion.

He was now nearly ten thousand dollars ahead, for during the last hour the stakes had all been large ones and the young man had been lucky enough to capture almost all of the big "pots."

The railroad kings were annoyed, but still kept on playing, determined to "clean out" the Mexican before they got through with him.

Another half-hour passed and still fortune seemed to favor the young man.

All the town was now in their beds and sound asleep with the exception of this little card party.

Even the landlord had not been able to keep awake and had sunk to sleep in his chair.

For some time he had been dozing, only waking to consciousness when some of the players called upon him to "set up" the liquid refreshment.

Poindexter some time before, perceiving that the landlord had hard work to keep awake, suggested it would be a good idea to bring a bottle of whisky with a pitcher of water and some glasses and place them on a small table convenient to the one around which the players sat, so that they could help themselves when they felt inclined to take a "nip," and thus save them the trouble of rousing him every now and then.

This was done and Goslton, in peace, slept the sleep of the just.

All of the party had indulged pretty freely in the liquor but so great was the excitement under which they were laboring that the potent fluid did not seem to produce its wonted effect upon any of the players.

Of course the three railroad men were old campaigners and were "well-seasoned," as the saying is, and one of their ideas in calling for refreshments so frequently was to get the young man under the influence of the whisky, for they did not believe that it was possible for him to stand the quantity of liquor which they could drink without feeling it.

Of course if his brains became muddled it stood to reason that he would not be able to play his cards to advantage.

This was shrewd calculating on the part of the strangers, but somehow it did not work as it ought to have done.

The Mexican was apparently just as partial to the liquor as they, and did not in the least shrink from partaking of his share, but he seemed fully as able to stand it as any of the others.

Most certainly not by any outward signs did he give any indication that the liquor was affecting him in any way.

Two o'clock was rapidly approaching.

The railroad magnates began to grow weary. The game was becoming tiresome; it was too monotonous, this constant drain upon their purses.

But just a quarter before two the general struck a big hand.

He had three jacks in the beginning and on the "draw" he caught another, and coupled with the fact that his other card was an ace and he had discarded a queen, it was a hand hard to beat, and as they were playing regular poker, not the absurd, new-fangled game where a "flush" beats "four aces," a man with such cards would be almost justified in betting his life upon them, for only one other possible hand was there to beat it.

It was soon apparent that all of the players were lucky in holding good cards in this deal for one and all "chipped in" with prompt alacrity.

The general, although satisfied that he had at last got hold of a hand that was good enough to capture all the cash that the players possessed provided he could get them to bet, pretended to be a little dubious about betting and hesitated a little.

This was an artful dodge on his part to make the others think that he did not possess a particularly powerful hand, although from the fact that he only drew one card while the rest drew two and three apiece, any man of judgment would have been satisfied that the general thought he had a good thing of it whether he did or not.

But they were all in for "war" this time as the liberal betting speedily showed.

The Mexican went a thousand on his hand, and so it cost the others two thousand to "come in."

But on the next round when Don Ramon boldly slapped all of his wealth into the "pot" the others looked puzzled, even the general assuming the expression although he was secretly delighted beyond measure to witness the operation.

As surely as he sat at the table, a living, breathing man, he believed the "pot" was his.

The odds were a million to one that the Mexican did not hold the one particular hand which could discount his.

This was his opinion, and any experienced card-player, used to these abstruse problems, will see that the general was justified by the circumstances in taking such a view.

His exultation then was great when he beheld his opponent put up his wealth—his entire capital—on his hand.

This was exactly what he wanted—exactly what he had waited for.

At one blow now he could administer a crushing defeat.

The challenge of the Mexican, whether it was backed by "bluff" or cards, was enough for the judge and the Georgian, for neither one of them held hands of sufficient strength to warrant them in putting up money enough to meet the defiance.

Twenty thousand dollars was no small sum even for these wealthy men to risk upon a single hand at cards, and so both promptly "passed."

The general, though, after a careful study of

his hand, as though he was reflecting whether it would be safe to risk the dare or not, finally said:

"Well, really now, for the honor of the Southern Pacific railroad, I can't allow you to bluff us all out of our boots in this audacious manner."

"I shall have to see you!"

And then he went down into his pockets for his wealth, but had not enough, and was obliged to borrow both from the judge and the Georgian.

The sum completed, he threw it on the table.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "And now, what have you got?"

"Two pair," responded Don Ramon, with a quiet smile; but he did not display his cards, though.

"My young friend, it seems to me that you have been risking your money pretty rashly, if that is the best you can show," the general remarked.

And both Poindexter and the judge looked glum.

And for a good reason, too.

Poindexter had laid down three nines, afraid to "stand" on them, while the judge, still more chicken-hearted, had gone out of the game with four five-spots in his hand.

"Are the two pairs good?" Don Ramon asked, still smiling and with a quizzical look in his dark eyes.

"Oh, no!" the general responded, decidedly.

The other two railroad magnates drew a long breath.

They had been terribly afraid that the Mexican, by means of his magnificent "bluffing," was going to win this heady stake with a commonplace hand, which either one of them could have beaten if they had only had the backbone to back their hands with their cash.

"The two pair are not good?"

"Not by a jugfull!"

"You can beat that?"

"I can."

"How will four of a kind do then?"

Poindexter and the judge looked at each other and both in their own minds came to the conclusion that it was just as well that their caution had predominated over their courage.

The Mexican had come the old joke of calling four of a kind, two pair, which of course, strictly speaking, it was.

"It depends entirely on how high your four of a kind are," the general observed, not without a tremor, for a suspicion had flashed upon him, born of the other's calmness, that Don Ramon held the only hand which could beat his, four queens.

CHAPTER XVI.

VISITORS WHO WERE NOT EXPECTED.

"Oh, how high are my cards, eh?" the Mexican remarked, as cool as a cucumber.

"That is what I said."

The general was beginning to get nervous.

It was very improbable, of course, that his opponent could hold the one particular hand, but it was not impossible, and the coolness with which he was taking matters, seemed to indicate that he believed the money was his beyond the shadow of a doubt.

The other two railroad men were also excited, and were watching the scene with all the eyes in their heads, as the saying is.

It was as exciting a duel at cards as they had ever witnessed.

"Well, my four are not as high as they might be," the Mexican admitted. "Yet they ought to be high enough to take this wealth."

And he waved his hand with a careless motion toward the money scattered so recklessly upon the table.

All three of the tenderfoots had been in the habit of taking part in big games, but this one was a little beyond anything in their experience.

The general was visibly excited.

He began to fear that he had made a mistake.

Surely it was not possible that his opponent would speak in such a tone of conviction if he had not an invincible hand.

To end the suspense he cried out:

"I call you, what have you got?"

"Four tens!" responded Don Raymon, placing his cards, face upward, on the table, four tens and an ace.

General Bagshot drew a long breath.

The stake was his after all.

"Not good—not good!" he cried, with pardonable exultation, considering the circumstances.

"Your cards are not hefty enough to capture the pot this time, but here is the hand that will take it into camp!"

And he also laid his cards down, face upward, upon the table.

All bent over and examined the cards—all more or less excited.

"It is good, the money is yours," Don Ramon admitted, taking his defeat with perfect composure.

"Oh, I knew I had you—I knew there wasn't a hand out to beat me!" the general exclaimed, in triumph.

"Wrong you are, pardner, we hold the winning hand!" cried a hoarse voice.

The players looked up in amazement and a strange sight met their eyes.

Taking advantage of the fact that the players had been so occupied in the game that they had no eyes for anything else, three masked men had stolen into the room through the door which led into the saloon.

It needed only a glance at the intruders for the railroad men to recognize that they were members of the same band who had plundered the stage-coach on the road.

They wore Mexican ponchos, the folds of which falling around their persons served as a disguise, while their faces were concealed by small, black masks and huge, black beards.

The man who spoke was evidently the leader for he was in the advance of the others.

In one hand he carried a cocked revolver and in the other a small black "gripsack."

The other two marauders had a pair of revolvers apiece, the hammers were raised and they leveled them at the poker-players in a style which made the gentlemen feel decidedly uncomfortable.

It was a complete surprise.

The poker party was taken at such a complete disadvantage that all idea of resistance was entirely out of the question.

Death stared at them through the muzzles of the leveled revolvers and it would have been only the height of folly for them to attempt to give battle to the intruders.

"I allers hates for to dispute any gentleman's say-so," the masked marauder continued, "but in this hyer case I've really got to, for revolvers are trumps in this yere game, and I reckon that you are safe in betting all you've got, or ever expect to get, that I'm the galoot w'ot is a-going to rake in this hyer pot."

The general was getting purple with rage.

To be robbed of such a vast sum of money, and just at a time too when he was gloating over his victory was almost too much for mortal patience to bear.

"See here! you'll get shot in some game of this kind!" he blurted out, hardly knowing what to say, so full of anger was he, and yet understanding how completely the ruffians had him in their power, he hesitated to arouse their wrath.

"Of course—that is w'ot we are a-looking for, and you kin bet your boots that when our time comes we will die the gamest lot of roosters that ever kicked the bucket along the Rio Grande!" the leader of the disguised men answered.

"But we didn't come hyer to waste time a-shooting our mouths off."

"We mean business every time, and don't you forget it!"

"Now, boyees, jest keep yer eyes peeled, and if any one of these hyer gents is onwise enough for to move for to draw a we'pon, jest plug him so he will stay plugged for keeps, while I gather in this plunder."

"Seeing as how I hold the winning hand, gents, I don't see any reason why I shouldn't take the pot."

"Covered" as the players were by the pistols of the outlaws, taken completely at a disadvantage, to attempt to resist would be useless.

The effect would be apt to cost them their lives, and there was not one chance out of a thousand that they could succeed in saving the money from the outlaws.

"Have the kindness now, gents, for to h'ist up your hands, and keep 'em h'isted, too, until I corral this plunder, which will be apt to do us a heap of good."

Up went the hands.

The players were in a trap, and there was nothing for them to do but to obey orders, and take the matter as easily as possible.

The quickness with which the masked men stowed the money into the bag was wonderful.

And then, when the operation was performed, all three of the ruffians retreated to the door.

"Don't try for to foller us, gents, or we'll have to slaughter a few on yer!" the outlaw leader cried, and then they disappeared through the door.

The gamblers leaped to their feet immediately, but old Goselton never stirred.

He had slept all through this stirring scene.

"The scoundrels must not escape!" General Bagshot cried.

"We must rouse the town and hunt them down!" the lawyer yelled.

"If we rouse the citizens promptly, they will not be able to get out of the town!" exclaimed Don Ramon.

"We musn't follow them too closely, though, or we will be apt to get shot for our pains!" the judge exclaimed.

The senator from Nevada was nothing if not cautious.

"It will be an infernal disgrace if the scoundrels get off scot free with their spoils!" Poin-dexter protested, pulling out his revolver, which was a good-sized tool, capable of doing effective work.

"This way!" Don Ramon exclaimed, rushing as he spoke to a door at the other end of the room.

"This leads directly to the open air at the

back of the saloon and we will be able to head them off."

But there wasn't any key in the lock, and upon making this discovery the Mexican suggested that the landlord probably had the key in his pocket.

So valuable time was lost in waking Goselton, and when he was aroused he declared that he hadn't the key for it was always kept in the door.

A search disclosed that it had fallen to the floor, and by the time that the door was unlocked and the party reached the open air ample time had been afforded the outlaws to make good their retreat.

"Not much chance to overtake them now, I fear," the general observed, as the gamblers bolted into the street and listened with the hope that the footsteps of the retreating ruffians would fall upon their ears.

In this they were gratified, for the sound of horse's hoofs fast vanishing in the distance could plainly be distinguished.

"They have got the dead wood on us, gentlemen, and no mistake," the Mexican observed.

"It is dollars to cents that the fellows had horses in waiting, and after they got out of the hotel with the plunder they mounted and rode off, thus laughing at pursuit."

"No doubt about it!" chimed in the landlord, who had been listening intently to the distant sounds.

"And with the start that those galoots have got now you might as well attempt to chase a streak of lightning as to pursue them," Goselton continued.

It was the truth, and sadly the party separated.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN COUNCIL.

THE news of this bold exploit created the most intense excitement when it was made known to the town at large, which occurred the following morning.

The indignation of the citizens knew no bounds, and it was the general opinion that the scoundrels must be hunted down.

But it was the old story over and over again: "Who should bell the cat?"

There wasn't the least doubt that the robbers ought to be caught, and there was a good chance that if an earnest search was made some clew to the bold marauders might be discovered, but the question was who ought to perform the task.

The marshal of the town, the railroad magnates declared, was the man who ought to undertake this duty.

A more angry man than General Bagshot the town of El Paso had never seen.

This was the second time he had suffered, and he swore he would be avenged upon the scoundrels if it cost him half his fortune.

And in order the town should understand that he was thoroughly in earnest he wrote a proclamation offering a reward of a thousand dollars for the apprehension of any one of the gang, dead or alive.

This stimulated the citizens and in addition to the force, organized by the marshal for the purpose of tracking the marauders, some private scouting parties were formed, for the settlers rightly considered that a thousand dollars was a good deal of money and the present opportunity seemed to offer a fine chance to make a raise.

So interested were the railroad men in the subject and so determined to bring the outlaws to justice that they applied to the military commander at Fort Franklin for aid, in hunting the outlaws down.

Fort Franklin was a military post on the Rio Grande a short distance above El Paso.

The officer in command of the post, Captain Nicholas Breadalbane, impressed with the importance of the case, when he was made acquainted with the position occupied by his visitors, promised to do all in his power to capture the outlaws.

But, as he explained to them, in his opinion the task would not be an easy one.

The general had given an account of how the citizens had turned out after the first robbery and endeavored to track the foot-pads but had not been able to obtain the least clew to their whereabouts.

"Since my taking command of this post I have had a good deal of trouble with just such bands of marauders as this one," the captain remarked.

"The game they play is an extremely simple one."

"The bands are composed of both Americans and Mexicans with a sprinkling of negroes and Indians, and they have their allies and confederates in the towns on both banks of the Rio Grande, who aid them to dispose of their plunder and give timely information when any movements looking to their capture are put on foot."

"If it is the American authorities who are after them on this side of the river, they cross to the other side."

"Then if their depredations start the Mexicans after them, back they come to the American side again."

"It appears to me that it would be perfectly feasible for the American and Mexican authori-

ties to act in concert in this matter and so being caught between the two fires the brigands could be hunted down," the general remarked.

"Yes, there doesn't appear to be any reason why a scheme of that kind could not work," the captain replied.

"But during all the time I have been stationed on the frontier, nearly five years now, at this post and at two others further down the Rio Grande, I have never been able to bring the Mexican authorities to an agreement to act in concert with me against these scoundrels."

"Well, that is very strange, certainly!" the railroad magnate exclaimed.

"I don't see why there should be the least trouble in arranging such a thing."

"There ought not to be, but there is."

"Old settlers here on the frontier, people who talk bluntly and are not particular in regard to what they say, hint pretty broadly sometimes that the reason why these Mexican Dons, who are in command on the other bank, are so neglectful of their duty in regard to these rascals is that the scoundrels give them a share of the plunder they secure."

"The infamous scoundrels!" exclaimed the general, indignantly.

"It may not be true, you know, but there are mighty few men along the Rio Grande who are well posted, but what feel pretty certain in regard to it," the captain remarked.

"And there you see is where the trouble comes in," he continued.

"The moment the scoundrels commit any outrages of this kind and the hue and cry gets after them they make for the river as fast as they can, and when they are once across the Rio Grande it is a difficult matter to get on their track, for the inhabitants are seldom inclined to give any information, preferring rather to shield the rascals than to expose them."

"How's that?" inquired the general, who could hardly bring himself to believe that this statement could be the truth.

"Oh, they play the same game as the Italian brigands," the officer replied.

"They make a point never to trouble the poor people living on the bank of the river who might be able to give information in regard to their movements."

"On the contrary they take particular pains to be on good terms with them and every now and then put a bit of money in their way, so that it is almost impossible to get any information even if a man takes the risk of crossing the Rio Grande in chase of the scoundrels."

"Then unless there is some understanding arranged with the Mexican authorities it don't do for us soldiers to cross the stream for that would be apt to get us into hot water at once and we should hear in regard to the matter from Washington and with no uncertain sound either."

"But private citizens can cross the Rio Grande of course, supposing that a party got on the track of the robbers, and the trail was a hot one," the general observed.

"Oh, yes, but they would have to run the risk of encountering the Mexican soldiers who would be apt to try and make it pretty warm for any party of armed Americans that they ran across on their side of the line."

The general looked grave at this announcement, for the probability of such a thing had never entered his mind, and he had about determined to go with one of the parties—the one headed by the town marshal, an old friend, Gold-lace, who had openly declared it was his belief the outlaw had sought refuge across the river and had furthermore said that if he struck a "hot trail" he should not hesitate to follow it, no matter where it led.

The scouting-parties from the town set out, likewise the soldiers from the post, headed by the captain in person.

But though a most exhaustive search was made, not the slightest trace of the bandits could be discovered.

It was as if the Black Beards had taken wing and flown up into the air, or like the demons of old had vanished into the earth.

There was a good deal of sympathy felt and expressed by the townsmen for the unlucky Don Ramon.

Although his money was lost before the outlaws made their appearance, yet if they had not carried it off, there might have been a chance for him to win some of it back.

He bore his loss with the calmness of a philosopher though, and not a whimper of complaint escaped his lips.

It was generally suspected all over town that he was a ruined man, although he did take the matter so calmly, for unless he was a much richer man than any one supposed, such a loss as he had encountered would surely clean him out.

For General Bagshot there was little sympathy.

He had plenty of money and what was a few thousand dollars to the man who was worth half a dozen millions?

The general too had not made a favorable impression on the El Pasoites, for he was inclined to be domineering in his way, and rather "cranky."

As an illustration of this the millionaire had

got it into his head that in some way Don Ramon was to blame for his loss.

The idea was ridiculous, of course, and even to himself he was obliged to admit that he couldn't tell where it came from as there wasn't a bit of evidence hinting that way.

But for all this, he looked askance at the young man and confided to his associates that it was his belief the Mexican would bear watching, and the other two had also imbibed a dislike for Don Ramon, and for no earthly reasons, either, as far as they could tell.

It was a sort of instinct, that was all.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARGARET'S BELIEF.

In the organizing of the search parties, Daymon had taken a prominent part, as was only natural under the circumstances, considering that he had suffered severely at the hands of the outlaws.

After the first day's scout, though, he was ready to give the matter up, for, like Captain Breadalbane, he had come to the conclusion that the robbers had fled across the Rio Grande and sought safety on Mexican soil.

But when he found that the majority of the citizens were in favor of keeping up the search, he did not attempt to dissuade them from it.

Daymon was too experienced a man to attempt to run counter to public sentiment.

When he arrived home after the scouting party disbanded, he found Margaret awaiting him in his private apartment.

There was a peculiar look upon the face of the woman, and from it Daymon, who was a careful observer, judged that she had something of importance to communicate.

But before he could question her, she asked:

"Well, what success?"

"None at all."

"No clew?"

"Not the slightest."

"That is strange, for it would surely seem as if such a body of men would be certain to leave a well-defined trail."

"Yes, but those scoundrels are not led by a common rogue, and the raid was evidently planned in the most careful manner, and by keeping to the main roads, where there is considerable travel, they have succeeded in blind-ing the trail, it being clearly impossible to distinguish their particular hoof-prints from the rest."

"I did not think you would succeed in getting upon the trail," the woman remarked.

"In fact, I didn't have much hopes of it myself, and I felt pretty sure, right from the beginning, that even if we succeeded in striking the trail, we would not be able to keep it, for there wasn't any doubt in my mind that the captain was right in his guess in regard to the rascals taking refuge on Mexican soil, for that was the game they ought to play."

"I think I have a clew to the leader of the band," Margaret answered, quietly.

"The deuce you say!" Daymon exclaimed, in astonishment.

"Yes, and also a clew to the man I seek."

"Well, that is lucky; but how did you happen to get on the track?"

"If you remember, it was my idea to put myself forward as a lure, hoping to attract the attention of this man who, demon-like, blasted the life of the friend who was dearer to me than all the rest of the world besides."

The man nodded.

He had not forgotten the carefully devised plan by means of which the woman avenger hoped to entrap the unknown foe whom she sought so eagerly.

"But it was not until yesterday, that I encountered any one who answered to the description which my ill-fated friend gave me of the man who destroyed her young life," the woman continued.

"But yesterday, a man entered my store and the moment I saw him my heart gave a great bound and I said to myself:

"At last I stand face to face with the man I seek."

"You feel sure then that you have got the right man?" Daymon questioned, as though there was a lingering doubt in his mind in regard to the matter.

"Oh, yes, as certain as that I now sit here!" exclaimed the woman in a tone of conviction.

"He agrees with the description exactly. A bold, dashy fellow, handsome and with that indescribable air about him which is so fascinating to some women."

"Did you learn his name?"

"Oh, yes."

"A stranger?"

"No, not exactly a stranger, although he has not been in El Paso very long."

"Do I know him?"

"You do. It is the young Mexican, Don Ramon, of whom I speak."

A look of amazement appeared on the face of the man as the name fell upon his ears, and he shook his head, slowly and in a manner that betokened he had doubts in regard to the matter.

The woman was quick to notice these signs.

"You doubt the correctness of my guess," she said.

"Yes, to tell the truth, I do. I have seen the man a dozen times, and, as far as I can see, there isn't anything suspicious about him."

Very true and for all that I feel satisfied that he is the captain of this band of outlaws who call themselves the Blue Beards."

"But he was one of the men who were robbed in the hotel by that very gang," Daymon urged.

"Very true, but that was a cunning trick to divert suspicion from himself."

"And now I think of it," said the gambler, "the general declared that the man who acted as chief of the outlaws on that occasion was not the same one who commanded the brigands when the attack was made on the stage coach."

"Exactly, Don Ramon is the chief, and he couldn't very well be one of the party at the poker table and command the robbers at the same time."

"That is true enough, but for all that it seems to me you are barking up the wrong tree this time. Don Ramon certainly does not seem to have the audacity or dash that this outlaw chief possesses."

"That is something which is difficult to determine," she replied.

"But he exactly answers to the description which my unfortunate friend, gave me of her husband."

"Young, handsome, with a foreign look. Then, too, the account which this Don Ramon gives of himself tallies."

"He has been an officer in the Mexican army—comes of a wealthy family, but has squandered his money rather foolishly, so that he is not so rich as he has been."

"But in order to live like a gentleman, and at the same time enjoy an income, he has taken a ranch and gone into the cattle business, but that is only a cloak to conceal his true avocation."

Daymon shook his head.

The idea seemed too wild to warrant belief.

"You doubt?"

"Oh, yes, I do, for it doesn't seem to me possible that such a game could be successfully carried on."

"You will find that I am correct," Margaret persisted.

"The first chance you get, visit his ranch and see what it is like. It will not do any harm, if no good comes of it."

"Very well, I'll do so to-morrow," Daymon replied.

"It is only some eight or ten miles from here up in the mountains, and, as the scout is to be continued to-morrow, it will be an easy matter to have the march lead in that direction."

"But even if it is as you say, the chances are a hundred to one that nothing of any importance can be discovered from an examination of the ranch, for being so near the town he will always be prepared to receive visitors."

"Very true, but if you keep your eyes open you may be able to discover if there is anything suspicious about the place."

"I feel sure that my suspicions are correct and I shall do my best to entrap this Don Ramon."

"He may laugh at man's skill, but a woman's wit will compass his overthrow."

A few more words of light importance passed between the two, not worth the detailing, and the interview ended.

On the morrow, true to his word, Daymon contrived to have the scouting party of which he was a member take the trail which led past Don Ramon's lone ranch up in the hills.

But when the place was reached the gamester found that it was nearer twenty miles from the town than ten.

It was situated in a pleasant valley containing some five hundred acres of land, all of which appertained to the ranch.

The young man was not at home, being with one of the other scouting parties.

"There was a good 'bunch' of cattle grazing in the valley and an excellent flock of sheep."

A couple of herdsmen had charge of the place, a Mexican and an Indian—one of the tame redskins known as peons, so common in Mexico.

They were neither of them particularly prepossessing-looking fellows, but still no worse, if no better, than the majority of the class to which they belonged.

But as far as the gambler could see, there wasn't anything suspicious or out of the way about the place.

And on his return he said as much to Margaret.

With all a woman's doggedness she held to her belief though.

"He is my man, and I will unmask him!" she declared.

CHAPTER XIX.

A DESPERATE MAN.

For three days the search for the footpads was kept up, and then reluctantly abandoned, as not the slightest trace of the ruffians could be discovered.

Captain Breadalbane, whose utterances, on

account of his position, were received with great respect, declared there wasn't any doubt in his mind that the raiders had taken refuge on Mexican soil, and furthermore added that they undoubtedly had their lair on the west side of the Rio Grande, and now that they had succeeded in making so great a haul, the chances were great El Paso would see no more of them.

For it was always the policy of all such bands when they made the country in which they were operating so hot as to be uncomfortable, to betake themselves to new fields.

But for all this—despite the fact that the majority of the town believed the military officer to be correct in his belief, all possible precautions were taken to prevent the repetition of any such raid.

The police force were divided into two gangs, one for the day and the other for night, so that the town was carefully patrolled ever hour in the twenty-four, and, in addition to their revolvers, the night force were provided with repeating rifles.

And this arrangement was secretly made, not blazoned forth to the world, for it was the idea of Kleppleman to surprise the Black Beards.

He was one of the few in El Paso who believed that they had not seen the last of the ruffians.

It was his supposition that when a gang of this kind had succeeded so well in a particular locality they would not desert it until they had exhausted the "placer."

"They are lying low up in the hills somewhere," he observed to the High Horse, to whom he confided his belief.

"And their roost is so carefully concealed that they ain't got any fear of its being found out."

"It may be on the American side of the Rio Grande, and maybe it ain't."

"That none of our men were lucky enough to find it, isn't any proof, to my mind, that it ain't up in the hills somewhere, for that's a heap of wild country to the north of us."

"You jist mark my words. They ain't quit us for good, by a jugfull."

"They will wait until this breeze blows over—wait until they see another chance to make a big haul, and then they will jump in again."

And for this reason, when it was determined to put the police on duty both day and night, the matter was kept quiet.

Don Ramon had been one of the foremost men in the pursuit; not that he had taken upon himself to act as a leader, for when at the beginning of the affair it was proposed to put him in charge of one of the scouting-parties, he had modestly declined.

"No, no," he said. "I hav'n't any experience as a tracker; let some man who understands this scouting business take command."

"I will serve as a high private in the ranks."

And he was as good as his word, nor, during the scout, did he attempt to obtrude his advice upon the rest.

When he was appealed to personally, and his counsel asked, he gave advice to the best of his ability.

His bearing was a decided contrast to that of the majority of the men, nearly all of whom acted as if they wanted to "run" the affair independent of the rest.

When the pursuit ended, and the scouting-parties were disbanded, the young Mexican disappeared from the town, and was not seen for two days.

His absence was noted, and comment made that Don Ramon had probably got all the gambling he wanted, and would confine himself to attending to his ranch in future.

The general, however, shook his head when he heard of the absence of the young man spoken of, and to his two associates he confided his belief that Don Ramon was a confederate of the outlaws.

"Of course I hav'n't a bit of evidence to offer to support my opinion," he said.

"But for all that I hold it just the same."

"Instinct," suggested the senator.

"Exactly, instinct," the general replied. "And I tell you, gentlemen, strange as it may seem, my instinct seldom deceives me."

"It is my firm belief that the fellow bet in the extravagant manner in which he did on that last land for the purpose of getting us to produce all the money that we happened to have about our persons, so that it would be on the table, ready for his confederates, when they made their appearance."

"And now that the game has been worked we will not see any more of my gentleman."

The others looked wise, shook their heads, but said nothing.

In their own minds though they thought this supposition on the part of their associate to be a little far-fetched.

Of course there was a possibility that it might be the truth, but in their opinion it wasn't probable.

The general was not correct in his supposition that they had seen the last of Don Ramon for he made his appearance in El Paso that very night.

Just after the darkness had set in he walked into the Great Pacific Railroad Hotel and, in

answer to a friendly inquiry on the part of the landlord as to where he had kept himself for so long, replied that he had been on the Mexican side of the river trying to collect some money which had long been due him.

"Hope you have succeeded in making a raise," Goselton remarked, sympathetically.

"Well, I got a little, not nearly as much as is due me," the young man replied.

"I'm sorry to learn it, for after the way you got cleaned out the other night you must be rather short."

"I am; and there's some bills on my stock coming due pretty soon which must be met, but I'll be hanged if I know how I am going to raise the money."

The young man leaned on the bar and drummed idly on the counter with his fingers.

"Have a drink?" suggested the host, who felt decidedly sorry for the ill-luck which was pursuing the young man.

"Thank you, yes."

And then when Goselton placed a bottle and glass on the counter to his astonishment Don Ramon took twice as much liquor as he was in the habit of drinking, and, contrary to his usual habit too, tossed the whisky off at a swallow.

"Ah, that is good stuff!" he exclaimed. "That warms the heart in a man."

"By the way, what sort of a game do they run at that Royal Road to Fortune place?"

"Why, haven't you ever tried it?"

"No, I have never been in there to-night."

"It is the best one in town."

"So I have heard said, but I have never done much in that line, and never had the curiosity to go into the place."

"Well, I believe that they deal as square a game there as you can find anywhere. At any rate it has that reputation," the host remarked.

"I think I will drop in there to-night," Don Ramon observed in an absent sort of way.

"Going to try a little tiger?"

"Yes, I must raise a stake in some way and once in a while I am extremely lucky at cards."

"Three times in my life I have broken a bank and each time won a fortune."

Goselton shook his head.

"You don't have much faith in such things?" the young man said.

"No, I can't say that I have. My experience is that when a man wants money awful bad a faro bank is about the last place in the world where he can find it."

"Well, I will admit I am desperate," Don Ramon replied.

"And as I haven't enough money to answer my purpose I might as well lose what little I have scraped together in an attempt to win more as to retain it."

"Well, there's some logic in that," Goselton remarked.

"Oh, yes, 'nothing venture, nothing won,' you know, and, who can tell? luck has been running badly with me for some time, and now all of a sudden it may change and, if I risk it, a fortune may tumble into my grasp."

"Three times in my life I have succeeded and what I have accomplished I may do again."

Goselton saw that it was useless to attempt to dissuade the young man from the purpose upon which his mind was so firmly fixed, so did not attempt to argue with him, although in his opinion the chances were great that the *coup* which Don Ramon meditated could not be made.

No man had yet been lucky enough to break the bank, since The Royal Road to Fortune first threw open its doors to the public.

CHAPTER XX.

ANOTHER ATTACK.

THE young Mexican remained in the hotel, chatting with the landlord, until about nine o'clock, and then, with the remark that "play" must have commenced, took his departure.

Straight to Daymon's gaming-house he proceeded, and when he arrived at The Royal Road to Fortune, entered without hesitation.

As he had anticipated, play had commenced, and was in full swing.

There were fifteen or twenty people in the room, most of whom were acquainted with the young man, and all who noticed his entrance nodded to him.

Of the people in the place, though, there were only about half a dozen engaged in play, and they were all betting cautiously, risking but small amounts.

The others were lounging at the bar, talking with each other, or with the barkeeper, or else watching the progress of the game.

One peculiarity of Daymon's saloon was that no one was ever pressed either to play or patronize the bar.

The public at large were free to come in, take a chair and amuse themselves by looking on, and no hint was ever given that their room was thought to be better than their company.

Don Raymon joined a knot of loungers who were congregated at the left of the table watching the game.

Since the night of the attack which had so nearly resulted in the death of the owner of the place, Daymon had taken measures of precaution, although on the surface it was not apparent.

The dwarf, Old Zip Coon, armed with a couple of self-cocking revolvers, occupied a position near the door, and there he sat and gossiped with his neighbors.

Apparently he had merely "dropped in," like the rest, and no one suspected that he was there on guard.

The barkeeper too had been provided with a pair of double-acting revolvers, kept on a shelf right beneath the counter convenient to his hands, so that in the event of another attack the assailants could not have so easy a time of it as on the previous occasion.

For nearly an hour Don Ramon watched the play before he ventured to embark in the game.

He studied it intently, apparently busying himself with mental calculations in regard to the way the cards were running.

So far the "bank" was winning, although the luck was running very evenly, and neither bank nor players could boast of any streaks of good luck.

Don Ramon at last took the chair of a player who had been forced to retire from the contest for lack of funds and invested fifty dollars in chips.

This done he commenced to play, using fully as much caution as any of the rest.

All the bystanders had opened their eyes when Don Ramon took a seat at the table, for remembering his rash betting when engaged in the poker game, they expected to see him attempt to "astonish the natives."

But after the game proceeded for an hour or so, they began to see that they were not likely to have their anticipations gratified, for there wasn't anything sensational about the young man's game.

He evidently was no novice at the faro table and played on scientific principles, which was more than the majority of the rest did, for few of them understood enough about the game to make shrewd calculations, and really made their bets blindly, trusting to luck to bring them out on the winning side.

Don Ramon, on the contrary, played with as much calculation as though he was engaged in a game of chess, and as if he thoroughly understood what he was about. Daymon, who was a scientific player himself, recognized that in this young Mexican he had an antagonist who could play faro "for all it was worth," as the saying is.

But even in a "square" game, which on the present occasion Daymon's was, the percentage is so much in favor of the bank in the long run the player surely must lose all he hazards if luck was at all even.

This time, though, Dame Fortune seemed disposed to smile upon Don Ramon, and slowly, little by little, his pile of checks increased.

But though he was winning, it did not tend to make him at all venturesome.

It was evident he had made up his mind to play a safe game, and was not disposed to risk his winnings on any desperate venture.

Another hour passed, and by this time midnight had come.

The crowd in the gaming-hall had increased.

There were now about thirty persons in the room, and nearly a dozen were staking money on the game.

Don Ramon, by a series of lucky bets, had materially increased his winnings, but the rest had been losing, and Daymon could boast of quite a pile of money on the table in front of him.

Daymon had noticed that among the group around the table were three rough-looking strangers who had not joined in the game, and he had been keeping his eyes upon them, for he did not like their looks, and he fancied that he detected that every now and then they cast longing glances at the pile of money upon the table.

After midnight the throng in the room began to disperse.

At half-past twelve there were only ten visitors left.

Realizing that the game would soon close,

Don Ramon began to bet more largely, and as luck still favored him—the shrewd way in which he was playing had much to do with this—his gains now amounted to quite a handsome sum.

It was not often that the place ran long after midnight, and when the hands on the dial of the little clock on the shelf behind the bar showed that it was nearly one, Daymon announced that the game would soon close.

By this time there were only five players left.

Don Ramon, the only one who was winning, Slim Jim Johnson, the stage-driver, who had just dropped in to see how the game was running, but, yielding to the fascinations of the "art," had invested two dollars and a half, all the money he had in his pocket; and the three rough-looking strangers, who had bought five dollars' worth of "chips" apiece and "gone in."

"At one o'clock, gentlemen, we will shut down for the night!" the proprietor of the place announced.

In five minutes more the three strangers and the stage-driver were "cleaned out," while Don Ramon raked in a hundred to the good.

The three strangers looked at each other.

"Darned if I believe that this yere is a square game!" ripped out one, who seemed to be the leader of the three.

This sentence had evidently been agreed on beforehand as a signal, for the moment the words were spoken all three of the men whipped out revolvers, but the others were on their guard, for the angry sentence led them to expect trouble.

"Guns" were drawn on the instant, and the rest in the room had their pistols out almost as soon as the strangers.

There was a rapid exchange of shots, no one of the shooters taking the trouble to aim his weapon before discharging it.

Daymon was wounded and with a low groan sunk behind the table.

But all three of the strangers suffered.

Two of them sunk down in their tracks, but the leader, though wounded, was not disabled; and realizing that the battle was going against him he turned to flee.

The dwarf, revolver in hand, barred the passage to the door.

Again the shots rung out on the air.

The unfortunate dwarf received a deadly wound and sunk to the ground.

The ruffian rushed to the door, but just as he reached it and seemed likely to make his escape, Don Ramon sent a bullet into him that brought him to the ground.

In desperation he endeavored to rise and use his revolver, but his strength was not equal to the task, and, with a groan, he dropped the weapon and rolled over, senseless, upon his side.

The battle was ended.

And a bloody fight it had been, too, for when the men who had fallen were examined it was found that Daymon and both of the strangers who had fallen by the table were dead. Old Zip Coon had also perished.

By this time the police were alarmed and came in haste to the saloon.

The strangers, both the dead and the living, were carried to the police head-quarters, the body of the unfortunate gambler and the equally ill-fated dwarf being left in the saloon.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RUFFIAN.

IN hot haste the mayor of the town, Kleppleman, and the marshal, Goldlace, were summoned, for there wasn't the least doubt in the minds of the excited citizens that they had got hold of the chief of the robber band who had so boldly set out to levy toll upon the people of El Paso.

When Kleppleman and Goldlace reached the shanty, which served as police head-quarters, they found it crowded with excited and angry citizens, who were loudly declaring that it was about time that Judge Lynch was called upon to rise in his might and execute vengeance upon this vile scoundrel who had been captured.

Don Ramon and the stage-driver were endeavoring to calm the excited men by representing that it would be better to let the law take its course as there wasn't any danger of the prisoner escaping.

The arrival of the mayor and Goldlace put a stop to all this talk of Judge Lynch.

"What are you galoots shooting off yer mouths about Judge Lynch for?" the High Horse cried at the top of his voice.

"Ain't this hyer town of El Paso got a mayor, and ain't I the marshal of this hyer burg?"

"Ain't we the cusses what kin run the law for all it's worth? You bet every time!"

"No more howling about Judge Lynch, or I'll jump in and swallow two or three of you loud-mouthed critters!"

This prompt declaration put a stop to the tumult, for, as in all similar cases, the men who were doing the most talk were the very ones who would have been among the missing if there had been any dangerous work to do.

The first thing that the marshal did after his arrival in the calaboose, as the police shanty was commonly called, was to order it to be cleared of the crowd that had flocked into it.

This proceeding was hotly resented by the people, but when Goldlace doubled up his huge fist and vowed he would try the weight of it on any man who dared to disobey the order, the crowd grumbled, but they went out. Don Ramon alone being allowed to remain besides the police.

The wounded man had been placed in a bunk, and after the crowd had been driven forth, the mayor and the marshal proceeded to take a look at the prisoner.

At first both of them, being experienced men, saw that the man was severely wounded, and that a doctor was needed immediately.

So a messenger was dispatched for a medical man.

"I guess we have got the chief of these Black Beards this time," Kleppleman remarked.

"Yes, it looks like it," Goldlace rejoined. "But the galoots ain't got so much sense as I imagined or else they never would have tried the same trick twice."

"They might have known that after the shaking up they gave El Paso the other night it wouldn't be likely that they could do the same thing right over again and get off scot free."

"Well, yes, that was rather an error of judgment," the mayor remarked, reflectively.

"But then the trick worked so slick before I suppose they thought it would go through a second time."

"This fellow is hard hit. I reckon he ain't long for this world," the High Horse remarked after a critical look at the face of the sufferer.

"I want to try and get a confession out of him if I can," Kleppleman observed.

"There were only three of the gang in the town to-night and I would like to get a clew so as to get at the others in order to break the band up."

"Wal, I reckon these were the three best men in the gang and the others may not amount to anything if they don't have these fellows to lead them on."

The mayor agreed that this was probable and the conversation was ended at this point by the arrival of the doctor.

The medical man was a short, fat gentleman who, on account of a little difficulty with a patient in the East, had been obliged to emigrate to the land of the setting sun in short order.

Lycurgus Bussy was the "handle" which he had announced as belonging to him upon his arrival in El Paso, and the frontiersmen, with their usual contempt for high-sounding appellations had speedily reduced his name to Doc Buster, and this, and "old man Buster," were the titles by which he was generally known.

The doctor was a man of both education and ability, but he was a slave to liquor and so not at all reliable.

It was on this account that he had been obliged to leave the East, for, while in his cups, he had nearly poisoned one of his patients by a mistake in his prescription.

The doctor looked grave as he examined the wounded man.

"It seems to be a serious case, gentlemen," he remarked.

"But still you can't always tell about these gunshot wounds."

"The fellow is as strong as a bullock and what might kill another man would be only a flea-bite to him."

By this time consciousness began to return to the wounded ruffian, and upon perceiving this, the doctor took out his pocket medicine case, which he always carried, and administered a strengthening cordial.

As soon as he felt the influence of the reviving draught, the wounded man opened his eyes, and stared vacantly around him for a few moments.

Slowly remembrance of what had occurred came to him.

"Curse the luck," he muttered, hoarsely.

"Well, my man, you are in a bad way," Kleppleman observed.

"Tell me something I don't know," growled the other.

It was plain that his wound had not tended to improve his disposition.

"The doctor hyer says that it is big odds that you don't get over this thing," Goldlace observed.

The ruffian surveyed the medical man for a moment.

"Are you the doctor?" he asked.

"I am."

"Don't look like no great shakes of a saw-bones."

"You better not treat me with disrespect, or I'll poison you the first thing you know," the doctor retorted.

"No, you won't—nary bit of nasty stuff will you git down my gullet."

"If you have got some good whisky now, I'm yer man!"

"You don't want to talk about whisky or carousing, but turn your mind to attending to your mortal affairs, for, unless I am greatly mistaken, you are not long for this world," the doctor warned.

"That's a blamed lie!" cried the ruffian, doggedly.

"No, it isn't, as you will discover before you are an hour older."

"It's a lie, I tell yer, and I'll live to dance on your gravel!"

"Not a bit of it, for I'm not going to have a grave, I'm going to be cremated," the medical man replied, jocosely.

"You are badly wounded, my man, and there isn't the least use for you to attempt to disguise it," Kleppleman remarked.

"And setting apart the fact that you are wounded, you are in a mighty tight place, anyway, for if you don't die of your wound, you will certainly be hanged."

"Be hanged!" cried the man.

"Exactly, that is what I said."

"And what will I be hanged for?"

"Murder!"

"It's a lie, I ain't murdered anybody. I only drew my pistol for to keep myself from being robbed."

"That galoot that ran the faro-bank wrung in a 'brace' game on me, and I can prove it!"

"I'm a good, square man, I am, and I want you to understand it!"

"I'm from Eagle Pass, and no slouch either!"

"Oh, we know you, and we have been on the lookout for you ever since you worked that first trick here in El Paso."

"What trick?"

"Why, the same kind of a one as the game you tried to-night."

"I never was in El Paso before to-night in my life."

"Too thin! you can't make us believe that, you know."

"Ask the galoots who were with me. I'll leave it to them. We all came from Eagle Pass and got into El Paso to-night."

"Both your companions are dead."

This was something of a shock to the man, and his face betrayed the fact.

"Dead!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, both shot dead in the gaming-saloon."

"But your fate will be worse, if you don't die of your wound, for we'll string you up with your boots on, as a warning to the rest of the Black Beard gang that El Paso is an unhealthy town."

CHAPTER XXII.

BAFFLED.

THE face of the man expressed astonishment.

He stared in bewilderment at the grave, stern men who stood by his side.

"Wot in blazes are you talking about, anyway?" he demanded.

"Come, come! you might as well make a clean breast of it," Kleppleman replied.

"Make a clean breast of wot?"

"Why, we know you are a member of the gang, and thar isn't any use for you to attempt to get out of it."

"Get out of wot?" the fellow demanded.

"You know what I mean well enough."

"Blamed if I do! It 'pears to me as if you was clean off yer nut."

"See, my man, you are pretty badly hurt, and thar are big chances that you won't get over this pull, so, while you have the opportunity you had better do all the good you can," Kleppleman remarked.

"Oh! I reckon I shall be able to pull through," the fellow replied; but there was an anxious look on his face that belied his words.

"If you have any ducats that you value you wouldn't be safe in betting on that," the doctor observed, in his brisk, professional tone.

"I don't want to discourage you, you know, but the odds are about a thousand to one that you will turn up your toes this time."

"You may be able to pull through, as you say, but it will be one of the toughest pulls that you ever had in all your born days."

"It's a lie!" cried the ruffian, defiantly.

"I am worth a dozen dead men yet!"

"Mebbe you are, but if I don't succeed in getting this ball out of you, inside of the next ten hours, I wouldn't give a copper cent for your life," the medical man responded, bluntly.

The tone of conviction rather staggered the ruffian, despite his bravado, for he was not really and truly a hero, but, on the contrary, mortally afraid of death.

"Did you say that both of the other galoots had been peppered?" he asked, after quite a pause, during which he was deliberating over the situation.

"Yes, both were killed outright," Kleppleman answered.

"Wal, they was to blame for gitting me into this hyer thing," the fellow said.

"How so—how do you make that out?" Kleppleman asked.

"Why, I met them on the road as I was a-coming up from Eagle Pass, and they axed me how I was fixed, and when I told 'em I was bu'sted pretty near clean down to the bed-rock, they said they knew a trick which would pull in big money for us all if we only had the sand for to work it."

"And I suppose you said you had the necessary sand to work the aforesaid trick, eh?" Kleppleman observed.

"You jest bet I did!"

"And these fellows were members of the outlaw band known as the Black Beards, I suppose," the mayor remarked.

"Wal, I don't know anything about that," the ruffian replied.

"They never let on to me if they were."

"The game they wanted to work was to go into The Royal Road to Fortune saloon, get up a quarrel, and then grab the money on the table and get out."

"Both on 'em said they had known sich a trick to be worked and big money had been made by it."

"They didn't tell you that a game just like that had been worked in that very saloon?" Kleppleman asked.

"You bet they didn't fer if they had, I wouldn't have been fool enuff for to try it on a second time," the ruffian replied, emphatically.

"And is this all you know about the affair?" the mayor asked, a little incredulous in regard to the matter.

"Yes, sir-ee, so help me!" exclaimed the man, emphatically.

"And you don't know anything about this outlaw gang who call themselves the Black Beards?"

"Nary thing! Don't I tell yer that I am a stranger in these hyer parts?"

"I've been running in mighty poor luck for a month back, but this hyer fuss to-night beats the deck!"

"Possibly these men who roped you into this affair were members of this outlaw gang?" Kleppleman suggested.

"Mebbe they was, but they didn't say anything to me about it."

"I reckon though that you are barking up the wrong tree for they said they were strangers in these hyer parts, jest as I was, only they had come down the river while my trail was up the Rio Grande."

Kleppleman drew the others aside and held a conference with them.

"What do you make of this story?" he asked.

"I reckon, mayor, that the critter is speaking the truth," Goldlace observed.

"So it seems to me," added the doctor.

"The story appears probable, but with such scoundrels it is a difficult matter to tell whether they are speaking truth or falsehood," Don Ramon remarked.

"If there is anything to be gained by telling a lie you can rest assured that a rascal of this kind would not hesitate a moment to secure an advantage."

"Thar ain't a bit of doubt about that but I don't see what the feller can hope to make by lying about the matter," the mayor observed.

"Only that if he owned up to be one of the Black Beards he might expect to be put through in short order, while if he swore he knew nothing about the gang, he might escape further punishment, considering that he will be lucky if he gets off with his life as it is."

There was sound sense in what Don Ramon advanced, as the others were obliged to admit.

"I was in hopes that we had got hold of one of the Black Beards," Kleppleman remarked. "Although when you come to think of the matter and weigh it the way it ought to be weighed, it doesn't seem likely that the Black Beards would try the same trick twice in succession."

"That's so, sure as shooting!" cried Goldlace.

And the doctor also agreed, but Don Ramon shook his head doubtfully, and said:

"It doesn't seem as if it would be a likely thing for them to do, but the success which attended the first attempt was so great that it may have encouraged them to try a second."

"Well, it ain't much use to speculate upon the matter," Kleppleman observed.

"Do what you can for this wounded cuss, doctor, and we'll examine the dead men."

"Mebbe they will have something on their persons which will throw a leetle light on this mystery."

The bodies of the two men who had fallen in the fight had been brought to the calaboose and deposited in the other room.

So, leaving the doctor to attend to the wounded man, who now seemed to be losing strength and sinking into a state of insensibility, the rest walked into the outer apartment.

The search was a careful one, but the results were small.

But in the pocket of one of the men were some cards of a Valverde business house, which would seem to indicate that the man had recently been in that town.

This appeared to bear out the story told by the wounded man in regard to himself and comrades being strangers to El Paso.

"Well, gentlemen, I reckon that we didn't get a crack at the Black Beards after all," Kleppleman remarked after the examination was concluded.

"I was in hopes that we had wiped out two of the gang and plugged a third one so badly that it would be a warning to the rest to quit this section of country, but this hyer gang was a kind of an outside one, and we busted it all to thunder the first time it tried to take a trick."

"So we must keep our eyes peeled and still keep a good lookout, for I reckon we ain't seen the last of the Black Beards."

Just at this point the doctor entered the room and as the others fixed their eyes inquiringly upon him, he shook his head.

All understood that he hadn't anything favorable to report in regard to his patient, but they were not quite prepared for the announcement which he made immediately after coming into the room.

"Well, gents, you won't get no more information out of that galoot for he's cashed in his checks for good."

"Dead!" they all exclaimed in a sort of chorus, startled by the unexpected news.

"Yes, for keeps," the medical man replied in his blunt, matter-of-fact way.

"I knew the cuss was hard hit by the way he acted, and I reckoned he wouldn't get over it."

"Why, if he hadn't been as strong as a bullock he never would have stood it as long as he has."

"An ordinary man would have been dead an hour ago—he would have fallen right in his tracks after receiving such a wound."

Good-by now to all hope of learning if the three ruffians were members of the Black Beard gang.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SEEKING COUNSEL.

THE sudden and unexpected death of the keeper of The Royal Road to Wealth saloon, Michael Daymon, fell with crushing weight upon the woman who in her dual characters was playing so strange a part in the town of El Paso.

Then too, the dwarf, as faithful a servant as had ever lived, had also fallen in the affray.

At one blow she was left totally friendless, and just at the time too when she fancied she had gained a clew to the man whom she was hunting so persistently.

One circumstance only was in her favor, she had plenty of money, for in addition to the sum which she and her husband had brought into the town, the saloon had steadily made money from the beginning.

For a time she gave way to the wildest grief, for she felt that she was all alone in the world and she had really loved the gambler with all the strength of her nature, despite the fact that his way of life was one that all the world frowned upon.

It is an old saying, though, that the fiercer the grief the quicker it subsides, and it certainly was so in this case.

For after the first transport of passion was over, she became unnaturally calm, and immediately set to work to deliberate upon a future course of action.

Her liking for the dead man had been the only love in her life, for she had always been a strange girl, and now she determined to forget her grief by devoting all her energies to her mission of vengeance.

She fancied that she had hit upon the man she sought, but the part the man whom she suspected had played in this tragedy puzzled her.

There was not the least doubt in her mind that the ruffians who had so wantonly murdered her husband and the dwarf were members of the marauder band who called themselves the Black Beards.

And if they were Black Beards, and her suspicion was true that Don Ramon was their captain, how could that fact be reconciled with his promptness in shooting the ruffian who had so brutally murdered the unfortunate gambler.

The problem was a difficult one, and seemed to be beyond her powers.

And then, too, before she could proceed onward in her path of vengeance, there were other matters which claimed her attention.

First, the last sad rites must be performed for her dead husband, and then the saloon must be disposed of, for, of course, it would be impossible for her to carry it on, even if she had felt disposed so to do, which certainly she was not.

But in this difficult situation she needed advice, for it was almost impossible for her to attend to the business in person.

She did not wish to reveal the secret of her double life to the world—to allow all to know that the masked dealer of the farotable in The Royal Road to Fortune was no other than Margaret Umberson, who had won so good a reputation during her brief sojourn in the town of El Paso.

She shrunk from revealing the fact of her double life.

Now that the one part of the dual existence had come to so sudden an end, she saw how monstrous it was that a woman like herself should ever consent to lead such a life.

At all hazards her secret must be preserved.

There was the barkeeper, a well-meaning young man, who was full of sympathy, and

who greatly deplored the terrible accident which had occurred.

But Margaret hesitated to confide her secret to him, for something whispered that he was not gifted with sufficient discretion to be trusted with so weighty a matter; and then, too, he was not the man upon whom she could rely in case she needed assistance.

After long deliberation she came to the conclusion that she must have some one upon whom she could depend, for it was almost impossible for her to execute her scheme of vengeance alone and unaided.

Then suddenly, upon her remembrance, flashed the thought of the marshal of El Paso, lion-limbed, stout-hearted Gideon Goldlace.

"There is a man in whom it would be safe to confide!" she exclaimed.

"I am satisfied from what I have already seen of him, that he can be trusted, and I have not the least doubt that when he hears my story he will be certain to lend me his aid."

She resolved to seek him at once, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour.

The barkeeper after closing the saloon, in obedience to her request to be left alone with the remains of the unfortunate gambler, had departed, anxious to join the gossips of the town in talking over the stirring events of the night.

Margaret, by means of the secret passage which existed underground, forming a way of communication between her house and the gambling saloon, passed to her own dwelling and there assumed the attire suitable to her sex.

The disguise which she had worn while playing the role of dealer in the gambling saloon she rolled up and placed carefully in the bottom of her trunk, which she always kept securely locked.

"There, it is not likely that I will ever need to wear these garments again," she remarked as she performed the task.

"It was a fatal hour when I assumed them. In my wild thirst for vengeance I sacrificed the life of the only man whom I have ever loved."

"Perhaps if I had not resolved to devote myself to this task he might have been spared."

"Yet he was determined to make his home somewhere on the frontier and if he had not come to El Paso he would most surely have settled in some similar place, where death might have reached him equally as quick."

"In such a life as he led he was exposed to constant danger, and no doubt it was fated that he should perish violently."

"It was his destiny so to die and man cannot escape fate by flight."

As will be perceived by these remarks the woman was a fatalist—a firm believer in the oriental doctrine, "what is to be will be."

After she had assumed her own proper appearance again, she went to the front door and opening it peered forth into the street.

Various dark forms could be seen, collected in groups or moving up and down the street, although at such an hour the highways of the town were always deserted.

But the stirring events of the night had so startled the citizens of the town as to drive all thoughts of sleep from their minds.

As Margaret gazed forth into the night the thought came to her:

"How, in the midst of such excitement, will I be able to find the marshal?"

Then, too, as there wasn't one of her sex visible in the street, she shrunk from venturing abroad.

And as she stood in the portal, with the door only opened wide enough for her to look out, pondering over the difficult question, the veteran stage-driver, Slim Jim Johnson, came by.

Slim Jim, having what is called a sweet tooth, and always being well provided with money, had been a good customer at Margaret's shop ever since its opening, so the moment she caught sight of him the idea occurred to her to ask the stage-driver to be her messenger to Goldlace.

She would send word to the marshal that she desired to see him on particular business, and she felt sure he would come.

No sooner did the idea of this plan come into her head than she proceeded to put it in execution.

She felt that the stage-driver was a man who could be trusted.

If she requested him to be silent regarding her desire to see the marshal, she had confidence that he would not betray the trust reposed in him.

If the suspicion which she entertained in regard to Don Ramon was true, and the fact that she had held a conference with the town marshal became known to him, it would rouse his suspicions, and put him on his guard, and then the task to entrap him would be rendered ten times more difficult.

He was a wary bird, and the only way to succeed in capturing him was not to allow him to know that he was suspected. Slim Jim perceiving the open door, and the white face of the woman framed in it, approached, thinking that she might be curious to know the meaning of the excitement.

But when he asked her if she knew the cause of the rumpus, she replied she did, and so deprived him of the anticipated explanation.

Then she questioned him in regard to knowing the marshal, and whether he would be willing to carry a message to Goldlace.

"I desire to see the gentleman on important business," she said, "and although the hour is late, still I would like to see him to-night, and it is important that no one should know of the interview."

The stage-driver nodded shrewdly.

"Oh, I'll do it for you!" he exclaimed.

"And you can jest bet all the rocks you kin corral that I won't go shooting off my mouth all around the town about it, either."

And with this assurance he departed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A COMPACT.

THE stage-driver was a knowing fellow—a man who had seen a great deal of the world, and he felt perfectly satisfied that he could guess why it was that the lady was so anxious to see the town marshal, and so particularly desirous that the matter should be kept a profound secret.

That she should possess a knowledge of the stirring scenes which had occurred that night did not seem at all strange to him.

Of course, he had not the slightest suspicion that she had been a spectator—almost an actor in the tragedy.

He naturally supposed that from some one of the townsmen she had received an account of the bloody fray.

"She's like all the women—wants to have a finger in the pie, for all that she is so mighty quiet," he soliloquized, as he proceeded to the calaboose, anticipating that Goldlace would be found there.

"She has see'd something which has struck her as being suspicious and so she is in a hurry to put the marshal on to it, but she is mortally feard that she may get mixed up in the matter and so is anxious to keep inter the background."

Slim Jim was perfectly satisfied that this was the secret of the woman's behavior and rather prided himself upon his superior wisdom at arriving so quickly to the conclusion.

When he arrived at the calaboose, Goldlace was busy with the examination of the prisoner and he was obliged to wait until it ended before he could get a chance to take the marshal to one side and deliver Margaret's message.

"She is mighty anxious, you know," the veteran stage-driver remarked, after he had performed his task.

"Acts as if she had heaps on her mind; of course you would be safe in betting a pile of ducats that it don't amount to anything, but, you know, when a gal gits an idee into her head, like this hyer one, she jest tumbles to it right away."

"I know from the style in which she talks that she thinks that she has got hold of the tail of the biggest kind of a rat, but you will be able to see what the yarn is worth in a brace of shakes."

Goldlace nodded.

The High Horse knew but little of the girl, or woman, whatever she was, and he rather inclined to the opinion that Slim Jim's guess came pretty near the truth.

"Does she want to see me to-night?" he asked, not exactly certain that he had understood the stage-driver rightly in regard to this point.

"Yes, sir-ee, she wanted you to hustle 'round thar as soon as you can," Slim Jim replied.

"I have been waiting here pretty near a half-hour or so, trying for to git a chance to speak to you, but I reckon that don't make any difference. You'll find her up, and dressed, and waiting for you, 'cos she was mighty anxious for to see you to-night. I reckon she ought to have sed morning, hey? seeing as how it ain't so pesky fur now from the break of day?"

"All right! I'll stroll down that way," the High Horse replied.

"You'll keep quiet, of course?"

"Sart'nl you kin bet yer boots on that, and you'll win every time!" the veteran stage-driver replied, promptly.

"I'm one of the kind of men w'ot know enough for to keep my tongue between my teeth, and don't you forget it, either!"

And after this observation, accompanied by a series of significant winks and a prodigious grin, Slim Jim took his departure.

Goldlace, after arranging with the mayor to meet him at an early hour in the morning in order to deliberate upon future movements, left the calaboose and proceeded down the street.

The intelligence of the death of the wounded ruffian had quickly spread and as a natural result all the people who had been gossiping in the street flocked to the calaboose anxious to ascertain all the particulars.

This left the coast clear so that the marshal was able to approach the shop of the woman without attracting any notice.

Margaret was on the lookout and opened the door as Goldlace approached.

"I am glad you have come," she said, "for I have something of importance to communicate."

"Will you have the kindness to walk in, for I have quite a long story to tell, and we will be sure to attract attention if we stand here in the street to converse."

The face of the woman and the manner in which she spoke impressed the High Horse with the belief that she had indeed words of weight to speak.

Her manner immediately destroyed the impression which he had formed from what the stage-driver had told him.

"Sart'nlly, marm, I shall be happy to oblige you," he responded.

Margaret conducted him into the inner apartment, placed a chair for his accommodation, and then closed the door carefully, as though she feared some eavesdropper might be lurking near.

And when this was done she seated herself and without beating about the bush came at once to the point.

"I believe I have a clew to these disguised men who call themselves the Black Beards," she said.

Goldlace was astonished at this abrupt announcement for he did not believe that the woman knew aught of the matter.

"You don't mean it!" he exclaimed in his amazement.

"Yes, I am almost certain that I have a clew in regard to them!" she asserted, positively.

"And I think I can point out the leader of this ruthless band without doubt!"

The statement was made in such a decided manner that the marshal immediately comprehended that the woman was convinced she could do what she claimed, although in his mind there was considerable doubt in regard to her abilities in this direction.

"Wal, if you kin do that, marm, you'll be rendering the hull town a mighty big service," he replied.

"I have sent for you because I am only a woman, and I fear it will be impossible for me, single-handed, to bring this villain to justice."

"I need the aid of a man's strong right arm and therefore I am going to confide to you the secret of my strange life."

"The death of Michael Daymon leaves me helpless to carry out my scheme of vengeance."

This statement caused the High Horse to open his eyes wider than before, for he couldn't understand what she had to do with the dead gambler.

The reader is already acquainted with her story and so we will not take up space by repeating it.

She told of her friend who had wedded so blissfully and whose "lord" had turned out to be the desperate captain of a ruthless band of outlaws, and how she had determined to revenge the cruel wrong that had been done the woman whom she loved with even more than a sister's passion.

Then, related the particulars of her marriage to the gambler, and their journey to the West, finally settling in El Paso, for it was in the neighborhood of that town that the man who had ruined the life of so fair a young girl had his head-quarters.

She gave full particulars of the trap which she had laid for the purpose of insnaring the man whom she sought, and how a party who answered to the description of the villain of whom she was in search had made his appearance.

"But now," she said in conclusion, "just at the moment when fortune seemed to favor me by bringing me face to face with the ruthless villain, there falls this terrible blow, which, at one fell swoop destroys the plan I have so carefully formed."

"Count me into the game!" Goldlace exclaimed, immediately.

"I reckon I kin fill the bill as well as any man who shakes a leg on top of this yere airth!"

"But who is the critter you 'spicion—do I know the galoot?"

"It is this young Mexican who calls himself Don Ramon!"

Goldlace gave vent to a low whistle, indicative of the most intense surprise.

"Say, marm, really, you must excuse me, but ain't you barking up the wrong tree in this hyer matter?" the High Horse exclaimed, unable to repress his amazement.

"I know the feller as well as I do any man in the town. He was the galoot w'ot plugged the stranger last night who salivated yer husband."

"Two of a trade never agree, you know," replied the woman, shrewdly.

The truth of this terse sentence impressed the High Horse immediately.

"By Jinks! I reckon you are right thar; as near as we kin find out, these cusses who went in to make a stake last night, are not members of the Black Beard gang."

"Exactly, and that was why he attacked them. But give me your aid and I will snare him."

"You shall have it, marm. I'm with you to the death!"

And so the compact was made.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BOLD MOVE.

TIME passed on.

For three or four days El Paso was in a ferment over the killing of the desperadoes, but as nothing more transpired in regard to them, and the Black Beards did not put in an appearance, the excitement began to die out.

It was the general opinion that the wounded ruffian had spoken the truth, and that neither he nor his companions had any connection with the Black Beards.

There were some in the town though that held to the contrary, and prominent amid these doubters was Don Ramon.

"Of course the fellow would deny it," he remarked.

"He hadn't any idea that death was so near, and he felt pretty certain that if he admitted he was one of the Black Beards, there wouldn't be much mercy shown him."

"He didn't dream that his sands of life were so nearly to an end, and so, in order to avoid being strung up with scant ceremony, he denied that he had anything to do with the scoundrels who have been carrying matters with so high a hand in this region."

This voiced the opinion of those who held to the belief that the desperadoes were members of the notorious band who had made themselves so conspicuous in the neighborhood of El Paso.

But the town soon had something else to talk about, a couple of prominent citizens having got into a "shooting-match," which pretty nearly resulted in the death of one of them, both being severely wounded in the encounter.

Goldlace took possession of The Royal Road to Fortune saloon, and closed the entire concern out at auction to the highest bidder, producing a letter signed, "Mrs.

Michael Daymon," as his authority for so doing.

Of course everybody in El Paso jumped to the conclusion that this was the veiled woman who had presided at the faro table, but no one suspected that she was Margaret Umberson.

She had disappeared and all believed she had left town, frightened away by the dreadful tragedy which had occurred.

Before disposing of the building, Goldlace took care to fill up the entrance to the underground passage which connected the saloon with the shanty occupied by Margaret, and to nail down the trap-door in the rear of the saloon, by means of which the secret passage was reached, so that no one would be apt to suspect that anything of the kind had ever existed.

Meanwhile, Margaret kept steadily on in the path which she had resolved to pursue.

Don Ramon had evidently been fascinated by her charms, for he dropped in regularly two or three times a day under pretense of purchasing her wares so that he might have an opportunity to talk to her.

And the more that Margaret saw of the young Mexican the easier she comprehended how it was that her friend, a young and guileless girl, became so infatuated with him, for he certainly had the power to make himself decidedly agreeable.

The woman played her part to perfection, and Don Ramon, who had become really fascinated by her, flattered himself that he was making a favorable impression.

Of course an affair of this sort could not go on in a place like El Paso without attracting attention, and soon it became the gossip of the town that the young Mexican was "struck on the pie-gal," to use the terse expression of the "rounders."

The circumstance gave rise to a great deal of talk, for there were few men in the town, single or married, who had not striven to bask in the smiles of the woman who was by common consent the belle of El Paso.

Apparently he had found favor where the rest had failed, for she talked and laughed with him, whereas on previous occasions when any of the men of the town had attempted to win her smiles with some adroit compliments she had turned a deaf ear to their flattery.

The unsuccessful men were not pleased at the success which seemed to be attending the young Mexican's efforts, and more than one of them were heard to remark that, for two cents, they would "wipe the s'ile with the durned yaller galoot!"

But none of these envious fellows appeared to have the courage to "try it on," despite their boasts.

Don Ramon, by his actions on the night of the desperate attack, had shown not only that he had pluck, but that he was handy with his weapons as well.

A man might be as bold as a lion, but if he didn't understand how to handle the tools of death, he would not be a very dangerous antagonist.

It was the general belief that Don Ramon was no slouch—to use the vernacular common to the town—as far as weapons were concerned, and so, although there was considerable grumbling in regard to his apparent success with the beautiful Margaret, yet no one of the would-be rivals dared to pick a quarrel with the young Mexican.

Don Ramon pursued the even tenor of his way, apparently unconscious that any one was troubling themselves about his affairs.

His attentions to the lady were persistent and soon, encouraged by her apparent friendliness, he put the question plumply:

"Would she make him the happiest of men by becoming his wife and the mistress of his lonely ranch up in the foothills?"

Margaret played the role of a coy damsel to the life.

She affected to be terribly confused and entirely taken by surprise, begged for time to consider, protested that the avowal was so unexpected that she did not know what to say in the matter.

But she admitted she felt favorably inclined, and yet was reluctant to agree to take up her abode in the lonely foothills.

To this Don Ramon replied, in lover-like fashion, that not for the world would he do anything to cause her the least unhappiness, and suggested that it would be a good idea

for her to pay a visit to the ranch, and then she could determine by actual experience whether it would be possible for her to exist in such a lonely place.

To this the woman, with rare tact, made answer that she did not see how it would be possible for her to leave her business, which would surely suffer in her absence.

Don Ramon's answer to this was to draw forth his money pouch and count down a hundred dollars upon the counter.

"There, will not that pay you for a couple of weeks' loss?" he said.

"Oh! but I do not wish to take your money!" she exclaimed.

"Why not? It is but right," he rejoined. "I am acting selfishly in this matter. I wish to take you from El Paso, where you have friends and acquaintances by the score, and transplant you to a lonely ranch in the foothills where the cattle and the coyotes are about the only visitors who can be expected."

"It is possible, you know, after a sojourn there for two or three days, you will be so disgusted that you will come to the conclusion that under no circumstances would you be willing to make your home there."

"I do not think you judge me rightly in that matter," she replied slowly, and with an air of great deliberation, as though she was weighing the matter in her mind.

"I am all alone in the world; no tie to bind me to El Paso, or to any other place, for that matter."

"All localities are alike to me so long as I am contented and happy. You speak of friends and acquaintances: the latter I undoubtedly possess, but not the former."

"As I have said, I am all alone in the world, and one place is no dearer to me than another."

"I seek for peace and rest, and if I could attain these I think I would be as satisfied in a desert's waste as in the midst of a populous city."

"I am anxious for you to make the trial, Margaret, for I feel that my happiness is at stake!" Don Ramon declared, earnestly.

"From the moment that my eyes first fell upon your face I knew that you were my fate, and I made up my mind to try and win you for my own."

"I will not say to you that your face is the first beautiful one that has ever caught my fancy, for I have traveled extensively in my time and have fallen a victim to the charms of many a lovely woman, but this I will say, never in my life have I ever felt within my heart a passion more intense than the one which now holds sway there."

"I am not a rich man, nor yet a poor one. I can sell out my ranch at a good figure and will do so if you will only bless me with the priceless treasure of your love and then we can seek some civilized section and there build a home."

His earnest words seemed to produce a great impression upon the woman.

"I will make the visit," she said as she pushed the money toward him, "but I must go secretly so as not to give rise to idle talk. I will place my store in the charge of the town marshal, telling him that I am called away for a short time."

This struck the young Mexican as being a good idea and so the arrangements for the visit were made.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SPIES.

WHILE Goldlace did not feel at all sure that the female avenger had hit upon the right trail yet under the circumstances he thought it wise to take measures just as if there wasn't any doubt about the matter. After the woman became an inmate of the ranch it was necessary to provide some means so that she could communicate with the town.

This was so that if she discovered anything suspicious she could immediately send word.

How to arrange this matter was somewhat of a puzzle and it took the High Horse some time to devise a plan which was satisfactory to him.

At last he came to the conclusion that the trick could be worked by means of spies and a code of signals.

He assumed right at the beginning that it would not be possible for Margaret, after she

became an inmate of the ranch, to leave it for the purpose of communicating with any spies who might be lurking in the neighborhood, without immediately exciting suspicion, and by so doing interfere with the workings of the snare.

To place a couple of spies in the vicinity of the ranch was not a particularly difficult task, and if the spies were good men and performed their task properly it would not be hard for them to keep a good watch upon the ranch without allowing the inmates to suspect that spies were in the neighborhood.

But to arrange a method by means of which the spy within the ranch could communicate with the watchers keeping guard in the neighborhood without being detected by the inmates of the house was not so easy.

The quick-witted woman, however, when she and the marshal discussed the matter, suggested a plan which appeared feasible.

By means of certain signals displayed from the window of the apartment which she would occupy at the ranch she would be able to communicate with the spies concealed in some secure hiding-place near at hand and such a method of conveying intelligence could not easily be detected, if ordinary caution was used.

Goldlace had taken pains to get a full description of Don Ramon's ranch, of course taking care to word his questions so that his object in gaining information would not be suspected.

The ranch was built after the usual Mexican fashion in the shape of a Lollow square, with the court-yard in the center and it had not only windows looking upon the court-yard but some that also commanded a view of the open country.

Of course it was certain that Margaret would be assigned to one of the best rooms that the mansion afforded, and there was hardly a doubt that it would be one with windows upon the outside.

A code of signals was arranged; this was a simple matter, and then the marshal began to look about him for a couple of men, fitted by nature and training to act the part of a spy.

Plenty such men were there in El Paso, but the great trouble was to hit upon a pair who were equal to the task and yet could be depended upon not to betray the secret which must be intrusted to them.

It was not Goldlace's idea to allow the spies to know the full extent of the affair in which they were to take part.

He did not consider it necessary to say to them in so many words:

"I think Don Ramon is the notorious outlaw who calls himself Black Blaze and I have managed to introduce a spy into his ranch for the purpose of entrapping him."

On the contrary he concealed his plans as much as possible.

He merely said to his selected men that there was a "leettle game" going on in Don Ramon's ranch that he wanted to "get onto," and for that purpose he desired to put a watch on the place.

They were to be careful to keep out of sight, for if their espionage was detected by any of the inmates of the ranch the "jig" would be up.

But from some secure hiding-places in the neighborhood they were to watch the house, circling around it until they detected a white handkerchief in one of the windows, and then they must keep the strictest kind of a watch upon this casement, until they saw a red handkerchief displayed there, and the moment this signal was given, one man was to hasten to El Paso as fast as his horse's legs could carry him in order to report to Goldlace, while the other was to endeavor to approach the ranch, so as to secure a letter which would be cast from the casement.

Then he was to return to his ambush and await the arrival of his comrade with the marshal.

The two men whom the High Horse selected to play the roles of spies were about as odd geniuses as the town of El Paso could furnish.

The first was called Jake Blavelt, a tall, angular fellow, with so little flesh upon his bones that he was seldom called anything but Skinny Jake.

He was an old trapper and had probably gone through as many wild adventures on the border, and in the Indian country, as any man who could be found in all Texas.

The second fellow was a fit companion to the first.

He was no chicken either. John Thompson, he was called, but as there were three other men in the town by the same name, this particular Thompson was generally termed Old Man Thompson, from the fact that he was a withered, dried-up specimen of humanity who looked to be about ten years older than he really was.

Like his companion, he was also a veteran, but in an entirely different line.

He was a miner, and was reputed to have as keen a scent for discovering valuable minerals, as a hound has for the trail of the game it pursues.

Like the majority of the men of his stamp, though he had not profited much by his discoveries.

He found the lodes, but other men, with business sagacity and capital, developed them, and it was these latter who acquired the wealth, the greater part of which by rights should have come to the original discoverer.

Two better men than Skinny Jake and Old Man Thompson to execute such a task as the town marshal confided to them could not have been found all the length of the Rio Grande.

Don Ramon, in making preparations to receive Margaret, acted in all particulars like a high-minded gentleman.

The wife of his foreman, Signora Vasques, acted as mistress of the ranch, and he assured Margaret that this lady would do all in her power to make the visit a pleasant one, for she was delighted at the prospect of company, having always been used to the life of a great city.

"For the sake of her husband though, who has a fine position with me," Don Ramon explained, "she submits to the exile from the gay world in which she was reared."

The lady was to ride to the outskirts of El Paso and there meet Margaret, the shadows of the night covering the departure from observation.

Everything went like clock-work.

Margaret passed down the street and gained the open country without attracting any particular observation.

The few who encountered, and recognized her, imagined she was going for a walk and none had any suspicion that she was about to quit the town.

At the appointed spot Don Ramon and the Mexican lady, mounted on horseback, with a spare steed were in waiting.

The signora was a rather portly, middle-aged woman, with a face which still showed signs of its early beauty, although the experience of years had given it a somewhat bold and hardened look.

She received Margaret in the most friendly manner, rather over-doing the welcome to Margaret's thinking, for there wasn't any reason why the woman should be so delighted to make her acquaintance; and then too, there was a servility about her which strongly suggested the paid servant, instructed how to act.

But neither by word or look did the female messenger of vengeance give hint of what was passing in her mind.

On the contrary, she played her part—the role of a guileless, unsuspecting girl—to perfection, and acted as if she was delighted with the warm reception vouchsafed her by the other.

The night being a beautiful one the ride to the lonely ranch up in the foot-hills was a pleasant one, the more so that Don Ramon beguiled the way with cheerful conversation.

He was a thoroughly polished gentleman if ever there was one, and long before the ranch was reached Margaret fell to wondering how it was possible that such a man, so well educated, and possessed of so many advantages, should ever have taken it into his head to adopt a life of crime, the end of which could only be a shameful death.

But still she felt the fierce craving for revenge swelling in her heart, and her spirits sunk not as she rode on her perilous quest.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE RANCH.

It was a good three hours' ride from the town of El Paso to Don Ramon's lonely ranch up in the foothills, and it was nearly twelve o'clock before the party arrived at their destination.

But all was in readiness for their reception; an ample supper had been prepared, and, after it had been dispatched, Don Ramon remarked that as Margaret was undoubtedly tired by her long ride, Senora Vasques would conduct her to the apartment which had been prepared for her reception.

The girl thanked him for his attention, and, after bidding him good-night, departed in charge of the senora.

The mansion was an "old-timer," built out of unburnt bricks, in the Mexican fashion, and in the form of a hollow square, a court-yard being in the center. A covered passage led from the solid door which guarded the entrance to the mansion to the court-yard, and from there access was gained to the house itself.

This is the plan on which nearly all the houses on the Mexican frontier are built, a pattern derived from the ancient castles, and, like them, these ranches are designed both for shelter and protection.

From the earliest times of which we have any record, the dwellers on the Mexican frontier have been exposed to the depredations of the wild red tribes, the masters of the mountain and prairie wilderness.

And it was to guard against the attacks of these fierce red warriors that the Mexicans constructed their houses, so that they would serve both for shelter and defense.

The horse Indians—and it is of these tribes that we speak—hate to dismount from their steeds.

No finer cavalry is there in this world, for they rank equally with the Tartars of the Don and the dusky Arab warriors of the desert.

Shut up in their fortress-like houses, the Mexicans, however—no match for their red-skin foes in a fair fight on the open field—could bid defiance to all hostile endeavors to force an entrance.

From the flat roof of the mansion they could laugh to scorn the attack of the wild, red riders, and if they endeavored to force an entrance—which was seldom the case—could make them pay dearly for their rashness.

The mansion was two stories high, and to a large room on the second floor the Mexican woman conducted Margaret.

"Don Ramon has resigned his own apartment to you," the senora remarked, as she placed the lighted candle which she carried upon the table, and hastened to place a chair for the guest.

"He is very kind, I am sure," Margaret remarked. "And if I had been aware that he had discommoded himself to accommodate me I should have protested most decidedly."

"Oh! that wouldn't have made any difference," the woman responded, with a laugh.

"He is determined to make your visit as pleasant as possible, and he would do anything in his power to please you."

"He is very kind," Margaret replied, pretending to take an interest, which, in reality, she was far from feeling.

"This is the pleasantest room in the house, for it is the only one that has a window on the outside."

"All the rest have windows only on the inside, and they look into the court-yard."

"In the old time, when the Indians were bad, this was a dangerous point, for it was exposed to raids from both the Apache and Comanche tribes, and so the house was built more like a fort than a dwelling."

"But when Don Ramon took possession, he had this window made so he could command a view of the country around, for he said that otherwise the room would seem like a dungeon."

"Yes, I can understand that," Margaret remarked, as she glanced around the strange, old-fashioned apartment.

"Oh! it makes the room much more cheerful."

"So I should imagine."

"It is not a very delightful place at the best of times; but still I ought not to say that, for, I suppose, you have some idea of

coming to live here, and I ought not to discourage you right at the beginning," and the senora laughed and nodded significantly as she finished the speech.

Margaret assumed to be confused for a moment, cast down her eyes, and then laughed, acting as a maiden would under such a soft impeachment.

"I do hope you will come," the Mexican woman continued.

"You would be so much company for me and I feel sure we would get on famously together."

"Oh, yes, I do not doubt that in the least."

"And I feel sure that if you were to search the whole world over you could not find a nobler man than Don Ramon."

In this strain the woman kept on for a good half-hour, singing the praises of the Mexican to the best of her ability, while Margaret did her utmost to act the character of a coy maiden who had allowed the flower of love to spring up in her heart, and yet was unwilling to acknowledge the fact, even to herself.

It was late when the senora took her departure, and then Margaret, instead of retiring to rest, seated herself by the window and looked out into the night.

The moon was high in the heavens and though its light was obscured by passing clouds every now and then, yet, when it did shine forth, all objects were almost as visible as by day.

Some subtle presentiment seemed to keep the girl from her couch, for although the hour was late and her long ride—an exercise to which she was unaccustomed—ought to have greatly fatigued her, yet she did not feel at all like sleep.

"It is the novelty of my position, I presume," she remarked, communing with herself as she gazed out upon the stillness of the night, a stillness bidden every now and then by the shrill cries of some nocturnal insects, or the distant bark of the sneaking coyote on the prowl for prey.

The rays of the moon, shining into the room through the casement, rendered the light of the candle unnecessary and so she extinguished it.

Leaning back in her chair with her head resting against the side of the window, she fell into a dreamy meditation.

"Why is it that I cannot sleep?" she murmured.

"Is it merely because my mind is so active under the novelty of the situation or is it because fate wills me to keep on the watch so that I may discover some fact of moment?"

The riddle was a difficult one to read and Margaret felt that time alone could solve it.

For fully an hour she remained at the casement without anything happening to disturb her meditations, and then, just as she had made up her mind that she would lie down upon the bed and try to force herself to sleep, she fancied she heard the heavy doors which barred admission to the ranch, creak upon their hinges.

She listened intently.

The door was situated around the corner in the wall of the building which ran at right angles to the one pierced by the window of the girl's apartment.

But the casement commanded a full view of the road, the only one, owing to the peculiar nature of the ground, by which departure from the ranch could be made.

It was no mistake—no delusion!

The creaking of the somewhat rusty hinges plainly testified that the doors of the building were being opened to allow some one to pass into the outer air.

The girl shrunk back from the window, fearing that she might be discovered on the watch, yet she was careful to keep near enough, so as to be able to command a good view of the road without.

She listened so intently, and the silence was so oppressive, that it seemed to her as if she could hear the beating of her heart, throbbing as loudly, to her fancy, as the ticking of a good-sized, old-fashioned clock.

The creaking noise ceased and another one of an entirely different nature came to her ears.

It was a dull sound, not like that produced by the footfalls of a human, nor by the hoofs of a horse.

A moment more and the mystery was revealed.

Around the corner of the ranch, following the course of the road, right in full view of the window, came six horsemen.

Don Ramon was in the advance; next to him rode the husband of the woman, Vasques, whom the owner of the ranch had informed her was his superintendent.

All were armed, but that was nothing strange, such being the custom, but what was odd, their horses' hoofs hardly gave out a sound, each leg being muffled in a sort of a boot made of hide so as to deaden the sound of the hoofs encountering the earth.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE NOCTURNAL EXPEDITION.

THAT Don Ramon and his men should ride forth at this untimely hour was strange, but stranger still was the fact that they had taken the trouble to muffle their horses' hoofs, like a party of red-skinned warriors intent upon surprising the sleeping camp of an enemy.

That they were on no good quest was evident and now, more than ever, was the girl satisfied that her guess had been correct when she had picked Don Ramon out from amid all the men in El Paso as being the most likely to be the outlaw leader of the desperate band, who called himself Black Blaze.

As Don Ramon rode past the corner of the house he cast a glance upward at the window of the girl's apartment, and Margaret instinctively shrunk further back, for she feared that the scrutiny of his sharp eyes might detect that she was on the watch.

But such an idea never entered the head of the Mexican.

He had not the slightest suspicion that the girl was dangerous, and never even dreamed that the woman he had selected for a victim might be transformed into an avenger.

It was but a casual glance; that was all.

Dark-faced Vasques—Taos Jack, as he was usually termed, noticed the glance though, and as he was riding a little behind his leader, he urged his horse on so as to come up ahead of him, anxious to free his mind of a subject which had troubled him ever since he had made the discovery that Don Ramon had designs upon the girl.

The two were so far in advance of the others that they could hold a conversation without the rest being able to overhear it, provided they used proper caution and spoke in low tones.

"I see'd that you were taking a squint at the window," Taos Jack observed.

Despite his Mexican name and his foreign appearance the man otherwise had nothing of the Mexican about him, being a regular borderer, such as can be run across by the dozen in any of the populous frontier towns.

"Yes, I believe I did take a glance in that direction."

Taos Jack, having brains as well as bulldog courage, was trusted by Don Ramon far more than any of the rest, and so he was permitted to speak freely on all occasions.

"Did ye hev' any s'picion that ther gal might be a trying fur to play some roots on yer?" Taos Jack asked, his voice full of meaning.

"Oh, no!"

"Wal, I didn't know the rights onto it," the other observed in a rather dissatisfied way.

"I only took a casual glance up in that direction, that is all."

"It would be mighty ugly if this gal should happen for to take it inter her noddle for to play the sneak on us."

"Oh, there isn't the least danger of that!" Don Ramon answered in the most confident manner.

"Durn my cats! if I wouldn't give ten dollars fer to feel as easy 'bout it as you do!" the ruffian declared.

"There isn't any earthly reason why you shouldn't."

"I don't take much stock in women!" the other declared with an ominous shake of the head.

"Neither do I."

"Women to men in our biz allus bring bad luck."

"Your wife don't seem to bring much bad luck to you," Ramon retorted.

"Oh, I don't mean wimmen like her," the outlaw explained.

"She's jest like a man, she is every time! She's one of the gang and I don't count her."

"It is these outside women you refer to then?"

"That is it! That is w'ot I mean; the outside heifers, who don't take no stock in such a trade as we carry on, and who are allus skeered to death when they happen to diskiver that thar is something crooked 'bout the thing."

"Them is the gals w'ot don't bring no luck and a man w'ot don't want fur to git into trouble had better quit fooling around them."

"I agree with you that women sometimes make a deal of trouble for men engaged in a peculiar trade, such as we follow, but when a man in our line gets hold of a woman of the right stamp she can be of a heap of service to him."

"Oh, yes, thar ain't the least bit of doubt 'bout that, but this gal I take it ain't one of that kind."

"That is a point which is not easily decided, but one thing I can tell you," Don Ramon observed. "If she should turn out to be one of the right stripe she would be worth a dozen common women."

"Suppose we could get a decoy duck of the appearance of this girl, brimful of talent, too, wouldn't she be worth a small fortune to us?"

"Yes, yes, thar ain't any doubt 'bout that, but the question is, kin you make her drive in harness?" asked the other, with a doubtful shake of the head.

"That is something which cannot be ascertained until the trial is made," Don Ramon replied.

"But you can rest assured that if I did not think the attempt would be successful I would not try it."

"Mebbe it is worth the risk," the other admitted, thoughtfully, "but it kinder seemed to me as if it was rather risky for to go and bring the gal right into our ranch."

"How so?"

"S'pose she diskivers somethings and goes for to give the thing away?"

"There isn't one chance out of a hundred for anything like that to occur," Don Ramon made reply.

"No, I s'pose it ain't likely."

"In the first place, what is there about the ranch to arouse her suspicions?"

"Nothing at all as far as I can see," Taos Jack was constrained to remark.

"That is as true as gospel!" Don Ramon exclaimed, decidedly.

"True, she may see some pretty rough-looking men, but then cowboys and herdsmen are not renowned for either their beauty or their elegance, so that part ought not to alarm her in the least."

"And in course she can't git at the strong room where we keep the plunder?"

"No, not very well, considering that it is kept securely locked and the key is never out of my possession."

"Some of the gang might git on a tear and let the cat out of the bag," Taos Jack suggested.

"That is almost an impossibility," the other replied.

"In the first place our discipline is too strict; we don't give the men any chance to make beasts of themselves, and in the second place, I don't think there is one of the gang who doesn't feel sure that I would kill on the instant and without mercy the man rash enough to hazard the safety of all of us by any foolish movement."

"Oh, that's so, Cap, thar ain't any doubt about that," the other responded.

"The boys all understand w'ot is expected of 'em, and I reckon thar ain't any of them liable to kick over the traces, but I can't get over the feeling, somehow, that this 'ere gal ain't a-going to bring us no luck," and as he spoke, Taos Jack shook his head with a gloomy air.

"Jack, you are no prophet, so don't set up for one," Don Ramon responded, gayly.

The other shook his head again, but he did not attempt to reply, and the conversation ended.

The time has now come for us to lay aside all disguise and admit, what the attentive reader has probably suspected all along—and

that is, that Don Ramon was the outlaw chief, Black Blaze.

Margaret's guess had been a shrewd one when she had surmised that the dashing Mexican was the disguised marauder who had been making things so particularly lively in the neighborhood of El Paso.

And on this occasion, when Margaret had watched the gang ride forth beneath the glimpses of the moon, 'at a time when churchyards yawn and graves give up their dead,' Black Blaze had planned the most daring raid that he and his band had ever attempted.

As we stated at the commencement of our tale, the railroad graders were only a few miles from the Rio Grande, and were pushing forward the construction of the road upon which the iron horse was to travel with all possible speed.

There was a small army of railroad workmen, and the paymaster, with the funds to pay them off for the last month, had just arrived that afternoon.

Of course he had a large amount of money in his possession, and Don Ramon, happening to hear the news, immediately investigated the matter, and came at once to the conclusion that there was a chance for a big stroke of business.

And so it was that Black Blaze and his band, under cover of the night, rode toward Slab City.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A BOLD MOVE.

SLAB CITY was the appellation which the railroad men had bestowed upon their headquarters.

The name came from the fact that their shanties were all built out of slabs, which, with the aid of a broad-ax, they had hewed from the neighboring forest.

The railroad camp was a jolly place after nightfall, for with the completion of the day's toil the railroad workmen went in for enjoyment.

There were three good-sized saloons, where all sorts of liquors and all sorts of games could be indulged in from humble beer to sparkling champagne, and "chuck-a-luck" to lordly faro.

The advent of the paymasters tended to make "things hum," as one of the principal saloon-keepers expressed it.

There was about ten thousand dollars due the men, and there wasn't any doubt that the disbursement of such a sum as this in a place of the size of Slab City would certainly give the "town" a decided boom for quite a while.

Slab City was a peculiar place, a sort of wandering city, as it were, for as fast as the railroad men advanced, the town gathered itself together, and moved right along with them, inhabitants, houses and all.

Just about a month Slab City stayed in one place, and then, heigh, presto! in a night, as it were, like Aladdin's palace, it vanished from the spot where it had once stood, and reappeared on the line twenty miles to the westward.

Great was the rejoicing in the town when it became known that the paymaster had arrived, and that contained in the well-guarded outfit was some ten thousand dollars in hard cash.

The paymaster and his escort arrived in the middle of the afternoon, and it only took a few hours for every workman on the road—to say nothing of the saloon-keepers and bummers of the town—to become acquainted with the fact that the wealth had come, and the result was, at night, the "camp" went on a first-class spree, to celebrate the joyful event.

The paymaster—who was a short, stout gentleman, known as Major Eben Smith, as jolly a sport as ever handled the funds of a railroad—and his assistants, two in number, were the lions of the hour.

And as the leading saloon-keeper of the place observed—with a great deal of justice, as it was thought when the speech was commented upon—"Thar ain't no burg this side of the Mississipp' from St. Louis cl'ar to Frisco, w'ot could set up a better lay-out than Slab City provided for Major Smith."

Truth compels the statement that the rejoicing on account of the arrival of the paymaster took such a form that there were not many of the inhabitants of the town who

went to bed strictly sober on this eventful evening.

It was after one o'clock before the camp quieted down, and the last straggler ceased to disturb the stillness of the night with unearthly yells, prancing up and down the street, as he vainly besought some one else to:

"Come, an' hev another bowl—jes' one, fur a night-cap, and then we will swear off!"

By two the town had relapsed into stillness, and slumber's chains were around the inhabitants, drawn the tighter on account of the amount of liquor which the most of the sleepers had swallowed.

It was a few minutes after three when Black Blaze and his marauders approached the town.

There wasn't a soul in the place but what was buried in the deepest kind of slumber, but the outlaws approached the settlement with as much caution as though they expected to find half the town enjoying a cat-like sleep, which could be broken by the least noise.

Don Ramon had happened to be in a saloon in El Paso when the intelligence of the arrival of the paymaster at Slab City reached the town, and he immediately mounted his horse and rode over, for the idea occurred to him on the instant that there was a chance to do a fine stroke of business.

He procured an introduction to Major Smith, invited him, on behalf of the citizens of El Paso, to pay a visit to that thriving town at his earliest opportunity and make himself generally agreeable.

The object of his visit he accomplished in the most complete manner.

He ascertained exactly how the paymaster and his assistants were quartered, learned the strength of the guard who had escorted the "outfit" from the end of the completed railroad, and how the "warriors" were posted.

Major Smith was an old hand at the business, and he had anticipated that if the news of his being on the way with so large a sum as ten thousand dollars got abroad, there might be danger that some of the "boys" would organize an expedition with the object of relieving him of so much care.

So he had taken the precaution to engage a guard strong enough to bid defiance to the attack of any ordinary band of marauders.

But after arriving in Slab City without encountering the slightest trouble on the road, it was not strange that in a measure he relaxed his precautions.

In Slab City, surrounded by the railroad workmen, there did not seem to him that there was any danger of attack.

The major and his assistants were domiciled in the railroad head-quarters, a large shanty which stood in the center of the town.

The shanty was only one story in height and divided into two apartments.

The outer one answered for an office for the contractor who employed the men, and his superintendent, the boss of the job.

In the inner room they slept.

On this occasion, however, the contractor resigned his bed-room to Major Smith and arranged temporary bunks for himself and the superintendent in the outer office, while the armed escort were assigned quarters in a neighboring building which was usually used for a store-house.

As it happened, though, at this time the shanty was nearly empty, and room was easily made in it for the men's bunks.

There were two doors to the contractor's house.

One large one in the front which gave admission into the office, and a small one in the rear leading into the sleeping apartment.

Both of the locks—the one on the front door, as well as that upon the rear one, were just common, ordinary locks, such as could be easily forced with a skeleton key.

The front door being a double one was also guarded by a bar which was placed in position upon the inside, but it was not thought necessary to protect the rear door in this way.

All these facts Don Ramon had taken pains to ascertain during his visit to the camp, and so, when he led his marauders into Slab City in the early hours of the morn-

ing, he was thoroughly posted on all these particular points.

The band dismounted on the outskirts of the town and left the horses in charge of two of the men, for, as the leader of the outlaws observed to Taos Jack:

"Four men will be enough to do the trick. There are only three to be handled.

"That allows one to each man and one to secure the plunder."

All of the outlaws had taken the precaution to assume their disguises upon approaching the camp.

With the stealthy tread of the red Indians stealing, panther-like, upon their prey, the outlaws made their way to the rear door of the shanty wherein the paymaster slept.

The night was so bright that Don Ramon did not have to use the bull's-eye lantern, with which he was provided, to enable him to find the keyhole.

He listened for a moment outside the door before commencing operations.

Taos Jack was at his side, also listening intently, and Vasques had an ear as keen as that of a beast of prey.

Not a sound came to their hearing though, but the heavy breathing of the sleepers within the house.

"They are fast in the arms of Morphy," Don Ramon remarked.

"Oh, yes, they are putting in big licks in the sleep line," the other answered.

"It is not to be wondered at, for I reckon that the whole town, paymaster included, had h'isted about all the liquor that they could carry with comfort long before midnight came."

"That is likely," the other observed.

"And when a man has got outside of a pint or two of whisky it is apt to make him mighty sleepy. I know how that is myself. I've been thar," and the outlaw grinned as he made the confession.

Black Blaze inserted the key in the lock.

It fitted as well as though it had been made for it, and the outlaw chief turning it with the utmost caution shot back the bolt which fastened the door.

The noise could hardly be heard, so carefully was the operation performed, but when it was over, the marauder did not attempt to enter until he had listened for a moment, so as to be certain that none of the men within had been disturbed by the noise; then he opened the door slowly and cautiously.

CHAPTER XXX.

GENTLE PERSUASION.

STEALTHILY as so many cats, the outlaws stole into the apartment, taking care to close the door carefully behind them.

The paymaster and his clerks slept the sleep of the just.

Probably the extensive quantity of whisky which all of them had imbibed had something to do with the soundness of their sleep.

As we stated, the citizens of Slab City had indulged in a regular jollification in their glee at the arrival of the man who brought with him the sum of ten thousand dollars in hard cash and had the laudable intention of getting rid of it as quickly as possible.

After entering the room the intruders remained motionless for a few moments while the leader flashed the light of the bull's-eye, lantern over the apartment.

The examination satisfied the outlaw leader that there was little danger of the sleepers waking from their slumbers unless rudely disturbed.

"Now, then, the question before the meeting is, which is the best way to go to work?" the outlaw chief remarked in a whisper to his associates.

"These three will be apt to kick up a lively row if they all happen to wake, and though we wouldn't have any difficulty in getting away with them, yet the noise would be certain to arouse the camp and then all the fat will be in the fire.

"We must have speech with the major, too, for I take it that he isn't fool enough to lug the cash around with him in his pockets.

"Oh, no, he has got it stowed away in this hyer room in some snug place," observed Taos Jack, who stood next to the road-agent captain, and the rest nodded assent, the captain and Jack always doing the talking.

"There isn't a bit of doubt about it, for there's been a guard on this shanty ever since

the paymaster put in an appearance," Don Ramon observed.

"We will gag and bind these other fellows, then, so that we can interview the major without danger of being interrupted," the leader of the outlaw gang continued.

"The major is a nice, genial gentleman, and when we wake him up by pressing the cold muzzle of a revolver against his forehead I feel sure that he will not be so disobliging as to refuse to give us the information we require.

The rest grinned at this statement.

They had perfect faith that the scheme would work. Many a time had they seen it tried and it never failed.

"Now, then, boys, to work and make these sleeping galoots safe, while I look after the major."

The command of the outlaw captain was immediately obeyed, and the expert manner in which the job was executed plainly showed that the intruders were no novices at this sort of business.

Lariats were deftly adjusted around the legs, arms and bodies of the sleepers, and the work was done so carefully that the men were not disturbed until the gag was forced into their mouths, and then the ropes being immediately drawn tight, they found that they were helpless prisoners, unable to move, and so completely silenced by the gag in their mouth, that not the least bit of an alarm could they give.

While this movement was being executed Don Ramon had taken a position by the side of the major's bed and with drawn revolver menaced that gentleman.

But the paymaster slept entirely too soundly to be disturbed by any such slight noise as had attended the capture of his men.

When the movement was completed, Don Ramon nodded to his second in command who held the bull's-eye lantern and that worthy, Taos Jack, came to the opposite side of the bed, from where his leader stood and flashed the light of the lantern full in the eyes of the paymaster, while at the same moment Don Ramon shook the major gently by the shoulder.

The paymaster was a light sleeper and even the large amount of whisky which he had imbibed did not prevent him from waking immediately when the touch of the stranger was laid upon him.

And the moment the major opened his eyes Don Ramon pressed the cold muzzle of the revolver against his temple and said:

"Don't attempt to give an alarm or I shall be under the disagreeable necessity of drilling a hole through your head and after that operation is performed you will not be of much use to yourself or anybody else."

The paymaster glared around him for a moment, while he tried to collect his wits so as to understand what kind of a snare had been thus unexpectedly sprung upon him.

It did not take him long to make out what had happened.

The roughly attired men with their huge beards and the black masks which concealed their features, together with the revolvers, which they displayed in such a menacing manner, immediately convinced him that he had fallen into the hands of a gang of lawless men who were on plunder bent.

The major was a plucky fellow.

On a dozen different occasions he had given ample proof that he was no coward, but a man possessed of more than the average amount of bravery; he was also a man of sense though as well as courage, and when he made the unwelcome discovery that the outlaws had invaded his apartment and felt the cold pressure of the steel muzzle of the revolver pressed against his forehead, he came to the instant conclusion he was in a tight place, and that when a man found himself in such a position discretion was better than valor.

The surprise was complete.

As far as he could see he was completely helpless in the power of the intruders, and any attempt on his part to give an alarm would surely result in bringing certain death.

In a fair fight he would have stood up and fought to the last gasp in defense of the money intrusted to his care by the railroad company, but as matters were, he could

hardly be blamed for not offering resistance, considering that he would only sacrifice his own life without being able to save the railroad money.

These thoughts surged through the brain of the assailed man in much less time than we have taken to detail them.

Don Ramon allowed the major a couple of minutes to collect his thoughts, and then he said:

"I s'pose you understand, stranger, that we have got the deadwood on you in the worst kind of way?"

"Yes, you have rather taken me by surprise," the paymaster admitted.

"It is a way we have; it's nothing when a man gets used to it."

"I reckon I don't care to get used to it," the major remarked.

He had by this time fully recovered from the surprise, and was disposed to make the best of the situation.

"You must excuse the freedom with which we have made bold to call," the outlaw chief continued, "but as we have come simply and purely on business, we judged that there wasn't any use of standing on ceremony."

"Oh, don't mention it, I beg," the major responded with icy politeness.

"All I regret is that I didn't have notice that you intended to call, for if I had had any idea that I was going to be favored with a visit of this kind, I should have made preparations to have given you an extremely warm reception."

The road-agents grinned at each other; this sort of "fooling" was just to their liking.

"Oh, we are mighty bashful men for galoots in public life," the leader of the desperadoes responded, "and we always avoid anything of the kind when we can."

"But now, to come right down to business, for life is short and time is flying, we gentlemen of the road who act as toll-gatherers, don't like your durned old railroad for a cent, for the moment the iron horse makes his appearance in El Paso, it is good-by to our business."

"Therefore, I want you, and this blasted old railroad, to understand that gentlemen of our kidney are not going to stand any nonsense, and if our business is bust up, somebody has got to come down with the shekels."

"We want somewhere round ten thousand dollars for to square the matter, and as we understand you have got about that amount of cash, we will trouble you to hand it over."

"Well, boys, I'm sorry to be obliged to refuse you, but not having any orders from the company to pay you the money, I can't do it," the major answered, setting his teeth together after he spoke with grim determination.

The major was an obstinate man, and had made up his mind not to yield the money.

He had no hope of being able to preserve the treasure for it was in a small safe under his bed, and being in such a portable package could be easily carried off, but for sheer doggedness he made up his mind to put the outlaws to all the trouble he could.

He knew he was risking his life, but was willing to take the chances.

"You're inclined to be ugly, and I have a good mind to put a knife into you!" Don Ramon exclaimed, angrily.

"That wouldn't do you any good, and I couldn't give you the money anyway," the paymaster replied, undauntedly.

"Why not?"

"Because it is in a safe with a time lock, and it is set to open at nine to-morrow morning, and until that time no one can get at the cash."

"I believe you are lying!" the outlaw chief exclaimed.

"Where is the safe?"

"Under the bed."

CHAPTER XXXI.

CRACKING THE SAFE.

MOTIONING Taos Jack to keep a wary eye upon the paymaster, Don Ramon stooped and drew the safe from its place of concealment, while the others glared eagerly upon him.

The desperado leader was a little disappointed at this unlooked-for obstacle.

He had not calculated upon being obliged to "crack" an iron safe to get at the funds.

It was possible too that the paymaster's statement in regard to its being operated by a time lock was correct, and if it was true, no violence offered to him would bring them any nearer to the money.

The only course for them to pursue under the circumstances was to carry off the safe.

Don Ramon was not an expert bank robber, but he knew that safes could be blown open by means of gunpowder inserted in the lock, and he did not anticipate that he would have a great deal of trouble in getting at the money.

The only inconvenience was in carrying away so cumbersome an article.

"We are going to have a little trouble here, boys," he remarked, "but I reckon we ought not to expect to collar ten thousand dollars in cash without working for it."

The rest nodded assent; such reasoning could not be disputed.

"I would blow the infernal thing open right here, only I am afraid the noise would be apt to raise the town," Don Ramon continued, surveying the safe with a doubtful eye.

Taos Jack was also dubious in regard to the matter.

"I tell you what it is, cap'n, we'll have a heap of trouble to lug that chunk of iron along," he remarked.

Don Ramon stooped and essayed to lift the safe.

The desperado was a powerful fellow, but it was as much as he could do to move the article.

Don Ramon shook his head.

"It can't be done, boys!" he exclaimed, decidedly.

"It will be almost impossible for us to manage the thing, even if we had a horse strong enough to sustain the weight, but I don't believe there is one in the party able to carry a man and this mass of iron in addition; so we'll have to blow it open right here and trust to luck to get off with the cash before the camp wakes up enough to discover that Slab City has been honored by a visit from the Black Beards."

"After the powder cracks the safe open, it won't take us long to grab the plunder," Taos Jack observed.

"Two minutes arterward we kin be in the saddle, and if we git a few minutes' start, thar ain't any hosses in this hyer camp kin ketch us."

There was sound sense in this observation, for the outlaw gang were all well-mounted.

Their horses were not large, being native steeds, but they were wiry little beasts, who could keep in good condition on the wild grasses under circumstances where the large American horses—as the "civilized" beasts imported from the East are always termed—would almost starve to death.

"Pete, go outside and warn the men to be in readiness for a quick start after they hear the noise of the explosion, for we will have to git up and git lively the moment the job is done," the outlaw chief commanded.

The half-breed departed, and the desperadoes proceeded to operate on the safe.

For men who were novices at this sort of thing, the Black Beards did extremely well, for they shattered the door of the safe at the first attempt.

True, owing to their being amateurs, and therefore not as well posted as they might have been in the little details of the safe-burglar's art, they used about twice as much powder as was really necessary, and thereby produced a noise which closely resembled a small earthquake, and the shock not only shattered every pane of glass that there was in the apartment, but burst open all the doors, sending the desperadoes reeling back against the walls.

"Thunder and lightning!" exclaimed Don Ramon, as he recovered his breath after the explosion; "I reckon we pretty near blew the shanty to pieces; but here's the ducats, all the same!"

"Grab 'em quick, boys, for there isn't any time to be lost!"

"Inside of five minutes we'll have the whole camp about our ears!"

The outlaws rushed in haste to obey the command of their chief.

The money was plainly exposed to view by the destruction of the door of the safe.

The bills done up in neat packages and the silver and gold in strong canvas bags.

It only took a few moments for the gang to clean out the safe, and then they hurried to their horses.

The town had been thoroughly aroused by the tremendous explosion and the inhabitants rushed into the street in wild alarm not having the least idea of what had occurred, but impressed with the belief that some dread calamity had taken place.

About half of the townsmen rushed into the street extremely lightly clad.

Some of them with but little more than a blanket wrapped around them, "in the alarm of fear caught up," but there was a large number fully dressed and armed men who had retired to rest so much under the influence of the potent whisky which they had imbibed in honor of the arrival of the paymaster, that they had scorned the labor of taking off their clothes and had "turned in" without even taking the trouble to remove their boots.

These worthies, of course, were all ready for a fight, and as it happened they comprised the best fighting men of the town, and it required "no ghost to come from the grave" to tell them what was amiss when they caught sight of the masked and disguised desperadoes rushing in hot haste from the paymaster's shanty with their plunder clutched in their fists.

These warlike citizens emerged from their houses just in time to witness the outlaws make a rush for their horses, and by the time that the Black Beards were in the saddle the citizens began to open full upon them.

"Don't waste a shot upon the fools!" cried Don Ramon as he swung himself upon his steed.

"Put spurs to your horses and ride for your life!"

This was good counsel, for the road to retreat was open and, as none of the townsmen were mounted, the fleet little horses would carry the outlaws out of all danger.

Deep cut the spurs into the sides of the horses and away bounded the steeds, seemingly as prompt to understand the situation and as quick to comprehend the necessity that there was for haste, as their masters.

The citizens blazed away with more haste than discretion.

Under the circumstances it was not wonderful that the marksmen were not particular about dwelling on their aim, and that each and every man seemed to think that the quicker he fired the better, whether he succeeded in hitting any thing or not.

But, despite the wildness of the firing the hailstorm of bullets came entirely too near the precious persons of the outlaws to be agreeable.

There is an old saying though that Satan looks after his own and on this occasion it really seemed as if there was a great deal of truth in the saying, for though a regular shower of bullets whistled around the desperadoes not a single man received any serious wound, although three of the band were "scratched" by the leaden messengers.

A circumstance which caused the wounded men to swear in the most ferocious manner, but, otherwise, produced no ill effect.

A few moments only were the marauders under fire and then, their fleet steeds bearing them out of range, they felt they could afford to laugh at their assailants.

"Now, boys, give them a parting yell of defiance!" cried Don Ramon, when he judged that the party were fairly out of range and that all danger for the present was over.

Obedient to the command the outlaws rose in their saddles and, turning, yelled in contempt at the pursuers, who were racing along at the top of their speed, as though they really thought they could outrun the galloping horses and overtake the fugitives.

The yell of defiance made the townsmen wild with anger, and they all cried out at the top of their voices and sent a fresh shower of bullets after the marauders.

But they had lost the power to harm the outlaws, no matter how careful now their aim.

Five minutes more and the desperadoes vanished in the distance.

Then arose a cry for horses, and, inside of ten minutes, twenty of the best men in the camp were in the saddle and pressing in hot pursuit.

The effort was fruitless of results though, for the outlaws had too great a start and the pursuers could not even succeed in hitting upon their trail.

The raid had been a most successful one.

CHAPTER XXXII.

AN UNEXPECTED CAPTURE.

THE cold, gray light of the early morn was lining the eastern skies when the outlaw band drew near to the lone ranch in the foothills.

Never was there a more jolly band of raiders.

The Black Beards had done some pretty good strokes of business in their time, but this last exploit went ahead of anything they had accomplished.

In fact, as Taos Jack remarked:

"I reckon that a bigger haul than this hyer pull of ours to-night was never made by any gang in this section."

"I think you would be pretty safe in saying that our raid has never been equaled, let alone excelled," Don Ramon remarked.

The outlaw chief was in an excellent humor; for the gains he had made since coming to the neighborhood of El Paso amounted to so large a sum that he felt he could afford to retire from business for awhile.

He had reflected upon the matter during the homeward ride, and now considered it wise to make known the result of his reflections to his companions.

They were riding along through a desolate waste, so there wasn't any danger of an eavesdropper overhearing his words, even if the hour had not been one when there wasn't a probability of any one being abroad unless it was some man of evil repute, bent on a sinister mission.

"We have done mighty well, boys, since we struck this upper Rio Grande country, in fact, as a college sharp might say, we have 'made Rome howl,' and I reckon the yell that will be set up when the people in this region find out how we have skinned the paymaster will beat anything that was ever heard in the section."

All of the band laughed outright at these words, for, in their imagination, they saw pictured the state of excitement that would exist in El Paso and its adjunct Slab City, when all the details of the raid became public property.

"There will be a deuce of a row about it and no mistake, and I shouldn't be surprised if they make the country too hot to hold us," Don Ramon continued.

"You see we have been going for them pretty lively."

"You bet!" exclaimed Taos Jack.

"Yes, there isn't any doubt about that. We have hit these railroad chaps three times and struck it rich every lick."

"Now then, the chances are just about a million to nothing that they will go for us all they know how."

"Oh, yes, their blood will be up now, and they'll be mighty apt to spend money like water fur to catch us," Taos Jack remarked.

"Exactly, and as we have collared a heap of money I propose that we divide the spoils and separate for awhile, until this affair blows over."

"Tain't a bad idee," the second in command remarked, reflectively.

"There's a small fortune apiece for each of us, and we can hop over the line into Mexico, and there's plenty of nice places in that country where we can enjoy ourselves like princes."

"The poorest man in our band will get a couple of thousand dollars, and with such wealth as that, in these gay Mexican cities, where there is wine and women fit for princes, what pleasure cannot be purchased?"

The eyes of the marauders sparkled, and every face was wreathed with smiles as they listened to this pleasing description.

"In six months' time, or less, perhaps, if our funds run low, we can resume our occupation and again scare the dwellers on the Rio Grande with the sight of the Black Beards."

"A mighty good idee—a big scheme, and I reckon it will work bully!" Taos Jack exclaimed, after Don Ramon had finished outlining his plan.

"I shall go direct to the City of Mexico," the leader declared.

"In the capital I can get more enjoyment for my money than elsewhere."

"And if any of you want to communicate with me before the six months expires you all know the hotel where I have my headquarters."

"A message sent there will reach me at any time."

This was true enough, but no one ever succeeded in finding Don Ramon there when he was sought, or anybody who would admit that they knew anything about such a man, but if the inquirer was persistent, the suggestion was always made that a written communication could be left, then, if any such man was in the habit of visiting the hotel he would be sure to get it.

This was a wily device on the part of the outlaw chief to guard against the possibility of being betrayed by any of his band.

"Your head is level, cap'n, 'bout this hyer thing, and thar ain't no doubt that the quicker we dust out of this hyer deestric the better it will be for our health," Taos Jack remarked with the air of a sage.

The others nodded assent, for they looked upon the second in command somewhat in the light of an oracle.

"We'll snatch a few hours' sleep, divide our spoils and be off," said the road-agent chief.

"And by the time that to-day's sun goes down to its bed in the Pacific we will be so far from here as to bid defiance to pursuit."

At this point the party came to the gate of the ranch.

There was a watchman always on the alert, both by day and night, and so there wasn't any delay in admitting the party.

They retired immediately to their bunks, after depositing the plunder they had secured in the "strong-room," as it was called, which was a secret apartment in the ranch devoted to the safe-keeping of the valuables secured by the Black Beards in their raids.

At eight o'clock all of them were up again, looking none the worse for their nocturnal expedition.

Breakfast was dispatched, and hardly was the meal finished when four of the herdsmen who had charge of the cattle, made their appearance, bearing with them a captive whom they had discovered lurking in the bush near the ranch.

Suspecting that he was after no good the ranchers had pounced upon, and, after a desperate struggle, secured him.

The man was Skinny Jake.

Don Ramon's suspicions were at once aroused, and although Jake protested stoutly that he had lost his way and so had wandered into that neighborhood, the outlaw chief scented danger.

Drawing one of his revolvers he cocked it and placed the muzzle close to the head of the spy.

"You scoundrel! if you do not instantly reveal to me what brought you here I will scatter your brains with as little mercy as though you were a coyote about to turn at my hand!" he cried.

Skinny Jake looked in the eyes of the outlaw chief and being a good judge of mankind read there that the speaker meant every word he said.

"Hol' on—don't be in a hurry!" he protested.

"Oh, I hav'n't any time to waste with you!" Don Ramon cried, impatiently.

"Speak quickly or it will be too late! I am not a man to be trifled with, as you will speedily discover unless you do as I wish. I know that you have come here for no good purpose."

"Some enemy of mine has put you up to this; you are hired of course. A man of your stamp wouldn't try a game of this kind without he was to be well paid for it, but I have a notion that after I drill a hole through your head with my revolver bullet, the money will not be of much use to you."

"Sart'in—that's true enuff," muttered Skinny Jake, who had come to the conclusion he was in a pretty tight place and that he had better get out of it the best way he could.

"Make a clean breast of it and I will let you go free but if you attempt to deceive me I will kill you here in cold blood as sure as there is a heaven above us!"

Skinny Jake valued his life too dearly to throw it away for a sentiment, and believing that his captor would be as good as his word,

concluded to reveal the mission upon which he was sent.

"You'll let me off if I split on the man w'ot sent me?" he asked.

"Yes, you may depend upon that, as sure as that I will kill you if you do not reveal the truth to me."

"Oh, I'm no fool to git myself killed in another man's quarrell!" the spy declared.

"I'll spit out the hull business. It was the marshal of El Paso w'ot put me up to it."

"He offered me a good stake if I would come out hyer and spy round your ranch. I was to scout in the bushes until I caught sight of a white handkerchief in a window; then I was to snug down, and when I see'd the white rag taken in and a red one hung out I was to sneak in near the window and then a letter would be h'isted out."

"Ah yes, I see!" Don Ramon exclaimed. "And that letter you were to take to the marshal in El Paso as quick as possible I suppose?"

"I reckon you've got the game down right fine," Skinny Jake admitted. To save himself he had betrayed the secret but not all of it.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SEEKING THE TRUTH.

RAMON'S brow was dark with an angry frown when the spy finished his tale.

For a few moments he was silent, buried in thought, for he could hardly bring himself to believe that the spy had spoken the truth.

If the tale was true, Margaret must be the one who was to give the signal, and she had evidently visited the ranch for the express purpose of playing the spy.

She intended to turn the tables on him in a manner he despised.

He set his teeth firmly together, and a demon-like smile flashed from his eyes.

"If she has come here for the purpose of prying into my secrets, bitterly shall she rue the hour when she was induced to undertake the mad enterprise!" he muttered.

"There is no punishment known to this world which I would hold to be too great to inflict upon this siren, if she has practiced her witchery upon me for the sole purpose of betraying me into the hands of my enemies," he continued. "But it does not seem possible; yet what reason has the fellow to lie—what can he hope to gain by telling me such a wild and incredible falsehood, if it really is a falsehood?"

The question was a difficult one to answer, and in order to gain more light on the subject, he concluded to put the spy through a cross-examination.

"This yarn of yours is a little too thin," he remarked, fixing his gaze intently upon the face of Skinny Jake, as though he would read him through and through.

The old trapper, however, stood the scrutiny without flinching.

If he was lying he had made up his mind to stick to his tale, as Don Ramon concluded when he saw how he bore the inspection.

"Nary thin!" he exclaimed, tersely.

"You don't expect I am going to believe it, do you?"

"It don't matter the wag of a yaller dog's tail to me whether you take any stock in the yarn—as you call it—or not!" the old man replied, stoutly.

"You axed me for to make a clean breast of it, and that is exactly what I've done. Tain't my fault if the yarn don't suit you!"

"Oh, but it isn't true, you know."

"That is jist whar you are out, pardner, for every word onto it is Gospel truth!"

"No, no; you can't stuff me so easily."

"What in thunder do I want to stuff you for? Will you tell me that?" the old trapper demanded, indignantly.

"You have got me in a tight place, and offered me a fair show to git out, and I'm jist the kind of man who crawls under the fence when thar ain't a living show for me to come the bird-act and git over the top."

"I've given you the story as straight as a string, and if you don't want to take it in, it ain't my fault."

There was honest indignation plainly visible in the man's voice—indignation at his word being doubted; if he was not telling the truth, but acting out a lie, then he certainly was a most excellent performer.

This was what Don Ramon thought, and by this time he felt pretty well satisfied that the man *was* telling the truth, but in order to probe the matter to the quick he questioned further:

"You say that the town marshal of El Paso employed you to play the spy upon this ranch?"

"That is w'ot I said, and it is the truth, too, you can bet yer boots on it." Skinny Jake replied, stoutly.

"What is the object? Why does Goldlace put up such a job?"

"Pard, thar is whar you are too much for me," the other answered, with a shake of the head.

"He didn't let on to me w'ot he was up to; nary hint did he drop of his little game; that he kept to himself. And I didn't ax him, either, 'cos I didn't think it was any of my business.

"Who was to give this signal that you speak of—do you know that?"

"No, nary hint did I git. I was to watch for the white handkerchief first, and then when I got my peepers onto that, I was to look out for a red one, then I was to skirmish in for to git a letter which was to be dropped from the window."

"Do you suppose the party who is to drop the letter knows you?" Don Ramon asked, after a moment's reflection.

"I hain't got the least idee 'bout that," Skinny Jake replied.

"Mebbe it is so and mebbe it isn't. I hain't got the least bit of a notion. I was to make a signal when I skirmished in arter the red handkerchief was hung out, by holding up the forefinger of my right hand in this hyer way," and Skinny Jake stuck his finger up in the air. "Then the document was to be h'isted out of the window, and I was to make tracks for El Paso with it as quickly as my hoss's legs would carry me."

Jake was lying a little here.

"Did I understand you to say that you saw the first signal—the white handkerchief?" Don Ramon asked.

"Durned if I remember whether I said anything 'bout it or not," the spy replied, "but I reckon I did get my peepers onto it all the same."

"It was displayed at the window right opposite to where you were hiding in the bushes?"

"Right you are, pardner, and that was why I was snuggled down into those 'ere weeds. I was a-keeping my eyes open for the red rag, do you mind?"

The prompt answer confirmed Don Ramon's suspicion in regard to the person who had gained entrance into his ranch, for the sole purpose of playing the spy upon him.

The only window in that side of the building near which the spy was captured, was in Margaret's apartment.

But why the girl had been induced to lend herself to aid the plans of the marshal of El Paso was a mystery which Don Ramon could not fathom.

Why she should be willing to give her aid to a scheme to bring to ruin the man who had been ensnared by her charms and who had sworn by every oath dear to the heart of a lover that he would do anything in the world to make her happy was more than the Mexican could divine.

"It might not be a bad idea to let you take your place in ambush again, and so secure this letter of which you speak," Don Ramon observed, reflectively.

"Oh, no; the odds are a hundred to one that that chicken won't fight," Skinny Jake observed.

"Yer gang and me had a lively tussle in the bushes and it ain't to be supposed that the party in the window didn't get their peepers on the skirmish, particularly as arter yer men got the best on me I was dragged right by the window."

"Oh, no; I reckon you couldn't play that leetle racket, no way you kin fix it."

There was sound sense in this remark, and Don Ramon was too intelligent not to perceive it.

He thought the matter over for a moment and came to the conclusion that the best way for him to get at the heart of the mystery was to see Margaret, assume that he knew more of the matter than he really did, and try to surprise her into a confession.

Skinny Jake watched the face of the Mexican with earnest eyes.

"Wa-al, pard, is it all straight and ker-rect?" he asked. "Hain't I done jest as I agreed to, every time?"

"Oh, yes; you have lived up to your agreement," Don Ramon answered.

"Then s'pose you fork over the ducats and I will git out."

"Oh, no," responded the Mexican.

"Why not? Ain't that according to contract?"

"Yes; but I don't think that it would be wise for me to allow you to depart just at present."

"You agreed to, provided I spit out all I knew."

"Yes, I am aware of that, but it isn't always wise for a man to live up to his agreements in this world," Don Ramon replied, with a significant smile.

"You are kinder going to get the best on me in this hyer b'iling," grumbled the old trapper.

"I rather think the advantage is on my side."

"Tain't a fair shake on me, nohow you kin fix it!" Skinny Jake protested.

"It is one of those things which will happen once in a while, and the best course for a man to take when he is unfortunate enough to get into a snarl of this kind is to grin and bear it as calmly as possible," Don Ramon rejoined.

"Why ain't you willing to keep to w'ot you said?" growled Skinny Jake, disgusted at this unexpected turn of affairs.

"Oh, no, since the marshal of El Paso has taken it into his head to trouble himself about my affairs, I am not going to allow him to get any ahead of me. I do not intend that he shall know that his little game has failed to work just at present, so you must be content to remain in durance vile."

"After I have discovered what the marshal is up to, then you can go free, but not before."

And so, in spite of his protests, the spy was confined in a strong room in the ranch.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A STORMY INTERVIEW.

THE old trapper was a philosopher, and when he found that his captor had determined not to release him he wisely held his peace, for he considered that it would be useless to waste words on the matter.

One consoling reflection though had Skinny Jake.

He had been careful not to say a word in regard to his companion.

Old Man Thompson had not been observed and was still free to carry out the original programme.

When the herdsmen had pounced upon him his companion had sense enough to keep quiet—he was only some fifty feet distant—and his presence in the neighborhood was not suspected.

"The durned yaller galoot! he thinks 'cos he has got me foul he is gwine to have everything his own way!" the old trapper muttered, after he had been locked in his temporary prison house and his captors had departed, leaving him to his reflections.

"I reckon Old Man Thompson though will be able to git the letter and carry the news to Goldlace that this durned cuss has me laid by the heels."

"Then thar will be a lively time, or the marshal ain't the man I take him to be. He'll haul this yaller galoot up to the captain's office and make him settle in a way he will despise."

And the old trapper chuckled in glee as he reflected upon the subject.

He had kept faith with his captor and done exactly as he agreed, but from the beginning he had made up his mind not to say anything about Old Man Thompson, and now he was heartily glad that he had been wise enough to hold his tongue.

Don Ramon had not the least suspicion that there had been *two* spies in the neighborhood, and so rested content with the idea that he had discovered the game of the marshal of El Paso right in the beginning.

"What in the fiend's name directed his attention to me?" he muttered, as he took his way to the apartment occupied by the girl.

"It is a mystery, and I do not understand it at all," he continued.

"The man's suspicions are evidently excited, or else he would never have employed this old rascal to play the spy upon me."

"And the girl, too; the idea that she should visit the house for the express purpose of prying into my secrets!—for there isn't the least doubt now that that is all she came for."

"Upon my word, it beats all the strange affairs that I ever had a share in."

"It is a case of the biter being bit. In my endeavors to entrap the girl, I have evidently caught a Tartar, and I must confess that I was completely deceived by her, and hadn't the least idea that she was not the guileless, innocent maid which she appeared."

"By Heaven! it is the greatest joke of the season that such an old soldier as myself should be taken into camp, and so easily, too!"

By this time the Mexican had reached the door of Margaret's apartment, and he paused for a moment to collect his ideas.

"This woman has dared to venture into the tiger's den with the intent to draw the teeth of the beast, as well as to clip his claws."

"She ought not to complain if the tiger turns upon and rends her in punishment for her boldness."

He knocked at the door; the voice of the woman bade him enter, and he obeyed.

Margaret was sitting by the window, gazing out of the casement as tranquil as though no untoward event had occurred to ruffle her spirits.

And when Don Ramon entered the apartment she turned and greeted him with a pleasant smile.

He had masked his features too with a smile, but it was as much as he could do to prevent an ugly scowl from appearing on his face when he noticed that the woman had a *scarlet* silk handkerchief knotted carelessly around her throat.

This was the handkerchief, evidently, which was to give the signal to the concealed spy that the letter was ready to be conveyed to the marshal of El Paso.

Don Ramon had not formed any particular plan of action, but when he saw the scarlet handkerchief he determined to confound her with his knowledge of the plot right at the beginning.

"Have you the letter ready?" he asked.

Margaret gazed at him in surprise.

"The letter?" she said, in a tone of question.

"Yes, the letter, you know."

"I do not think I comprehend your meaning," she observed, and the look of amazement which appeared on her face seemed so real that if the Mexican had not been accurately informed in regard to the matter, he would have been inclined to believe there was some mistake.

But as it was, he comprehended he was dealing with a woman who was a perfect mistress of the art of dissimulation, one who could form her face to suit the occasion with such rare skill that she was doubly dangerous.

"My dear girl, let us speak plainly in regard to this matter," he said, helping himself to a chair.

"In the first place, I presume you witnessed the skirmish which occurred a short time ago, when my men succeeded in capturing the spy who was lurking near this place?"

Margaret shook her head, and the look of amazement upon her face deepened.

Don Ramon, watching the play of her features as intently as the cat watches the movements of the mouse upon whom it intends to prey, thought that never in all his experience had he encountered a more perfect actress.

"You did not witness the surprise and capture of the spy then?"

Again the girl shook her head.

"You missed a treat," Don Ramon remarked.

"It was a lively skirmish while it lasted. Some of my herdsmen, who are blessed with sharp eyes, caught sight of this fellow lurking in the bushes and from the peculiar way in which he was acting, they came to the

conclusion that he was up to some mischief, and reported their conclusions to me.

"I immediately gave orders to secure the rascal and the job was speedily accomplished. When he found his little game was discovered and that I was disposed to take the law into my own hands and punish him without calling upon any one else for advice or assistance in the matter, he—to use your American term—weakened, and begged for his life. I agreed to refrain from hanging him, provided he would make a full confession and tell me exactly what object brought him into this neighborhood."

"But surely you would not attempt to hang a fellow-creature?" Margaret exclaimed, affecting to be astonished at the idea.

"That would be usurping the province of the law."

"When we stock-raisers catch a man lurking around our premises we immediately jump to the conclusion that he is a horse-thief, with designs upon our beasts, and in such a case we show scant mercy."

"We ranchers don't trouble the law much in such matters. We are a law unto ourselves, and one horse-thief, more or less, in Texas is never missed."

"But surely you would not execute a man without being certain in regard to his guilt," Margaret remarked, "for that would be murder."

"Well, as a rule we can always tell pretty nearly in regard to what a fellow is; and in this case it was perfectly plain that the man was up to no good, and if he hadn't made a clean breast of it I would have hung him as surely as I sit here!"

Margaret shook her head at this declaration, and the expression upon her face seemed to say that she was filled with amazement at the barbarism thus displayed.

"The fellow too believed that I meant what I said when I told him I would surely hang him unless he made a full confession, and so he told me all he knew, and to my amazement, I find that you, Margaret, the woman whom I love, have undertaken to play the role of Delilah and came under my roof for the express purpose of insnaring me."

"I insnare you?" the girl exclaimed, as if horrified at the bare idea.

"Yes, that is what I said, and it is true too every word of it," he replied, firmly.

"And I can tell you that when I made the discovery I was about as astonished a man as ever existed in this world!"

"How could I insnare you—in what way—what have you done?"

"That is just exactly the question I put to myself when the spy made his confession."

"What have I done and why does the woman whose love I have sought come into my house for the sole purpose of betraying me into the hands of my enemies."

"And, Margaret, I have come to you so that you might have an opportunity of answering these difficult questions."

CHAPTER XXXV.

AT BAY.

MARGARET lifted up her head proudly and looked Don Ramon straight in the eyes with a gaze as clear as that which comes from the orbs of an eagle.

"Does this man—this spy, as you call him—whom you have captured, say that I have aught to do with him? If so, bring me face to face with him and then you may be able to detect which speaks the truth!"

Don Ramon laughed—a low, mocking laugh.

He was not tricked by the cunning evasion.

"You are playing a good game, Margaret," he remarked.

"But, thanks to my capture of this spy, I have had a look at your hand and as I know exactly what cards you hold, it will not be a difficult matter for me to get the best of the contest."

"I fear that you think you know more than you really do," she replied.

"I gather from your words that he does not accuse me of being his accomplice, and, if that is the truth, why do you suspect that I am your foe?"

"You are managing this matter splendidly, but I am too old a bird to be easily ensnared!" he retorted.

"This Goldlace, the marshal of El Paso, is at the bottom of this matter, and, in some

way, he has contrived to enlist your services. But that, of course, is a secret between you and him.

"The El Paso marshal is a shrewd fellow; I do not underrate his abilities in the least, but what on earth set him after me is a mystery."

"He is not idiot enough to confide his plans to this old rascal whom he set to play the spy upon me."

"But the man, with the fear of death before his eyes if he did not make a clean breast of it, confessed that he had been employed by the El Paso marshal to watch this ranch."

"He was instructed to scout around the building until he discovered a window, at which a white handkerchief was displayed as a signal, then he was to watch that casement, by day and night, until he saw a scarlet handkerchief there, and, when this signal was given, his orders were to advance and receive a letter, which was to be conveyed to Goldlace at El Paso as soon as possible."

"Now then, this spy was captured in the bushes, right opposite to your window, and who else is there in the building but yourself to signal to him?"

"How can I reply to such a question as that?" the girl demanded.

"How is it possible for me to know anything in regard to the inmates of your ranch, and is it not as likely that some one of them may be working against you, as it is that I, almost an utter stranger, should join the ranks of your foes?"

"Shrewdly argued, but you are the person who was to give the signal, nevertheless. And there is the scarlet handkerchief which was to announce to the spy that the letter for the marshal of El Paso was ready," and as he spoke he pointed to the piece of scarlet silk which she wore.

Margaret smiled contemptuously.

"I see that it will be useless for me to deny the charge, for you will not believe me," she said.

"You are quite right; the game is going in my favor at present, and all the denials in the world will not change the situation. I admit, though, that I am puzzled, for I do not in the least understand what the marshal intends to do."

"Why have his suspicions been directed against me?"

"What have I done, or what does he expect I am going to do?"

"You are in his confidence, of course, and, considering that I have discovered your game, it would be only right for you to put me on my guard."

"Let me know why it is that Goldlace has troubled his head about me, and what are you expected to discover in this ranch?"

Margaret shook her head and an evil light shone in Don Ramon's dark eyes as he noticed the motion.

The woman was neither a fool nor a coward, and she had determined when she embarked in this dangerous undertaking, to meet with a bold front any dangers that might arise.

To confess would only complicate matters.

She was satisfied now that she was on the right scent.

After the high-handed capture of the spy, which she had witnessed from her window, although she refused to acknowledge it, she understood that the master of the ranch was not a man who would be apt to hesitate at anything.

She had been afraid, after witnessing the capture of the old scout, that, by either promises or threats, they might succeed in inducing him to betray the secret of the mission upon which he had been sent.

He could not implicate her directly, for she knew that Goldlace had not thought it wise to allow him to know any of the particulars of the affair outside of the task intrusted to him.

But if the man did reveal the errand upon which he came, it was clear that Don Ramon would be sure to suspect that she had something to do with the matter.

Under the circumstances, it was not to be expected that she should escape suspicion, and she concluded that the best thing for her to do in this unexpected turn of affairs, was to notify the marshal of El Paso of what had occurred as soon as possible.

This she could easily do by means of the

other spy, who had succeeded in escaping observation, and whose presence in the neighborhood was evidently not suspected by any inmates of the ranch.

She realized the necessity that existed for haste in the matter, for if the captor succeeded in inducing the prisoner to reveal the motive which had brought him into the neighborhood, search would immediately be made for the other spy.

So she wrote a brief note to Goldlace, explaining what had occurred, and stating that in her opinion there wasn't the least doubt that Don Ramon was the chief of an outlaw band, even if he was not the notorious Black Blaze in person.

And she ended by saying she feared there was danger that the captured spy would not be proof against the threats which would be made, unless he revealed what his business was in the neighborhood of the ranch.

If he spoke, the game was up, and, under the circumstances, immediate action was necessary.

Then with the scarlet handkerchief, she signaled from the window.

Old Man Thompson came in a hurry, for he had witnessed the capture of his pard, and was a little nervous in regard to his own safety.

"Mighty narrer squeeze!" he muttered to himself as he grabbed the letter, which came fluttering down from the ranch window.

"And I reckon I shan't be a bit sorry for to git out of hyer, you bet!"

And he acted on this idea with the utmost promptitude.

"Couldn't see my hoss's heels for dust!" he declared to the High Horse, when he reached El Paso and delivered the letter.

"And if I had worn a coat, it would hev been the easiest thing in the world for to hev played checkers on the tail."

Margaret had acted as well as she knew how, and having succeeded in sending a message to Goldlace, was prepared for Don Ramon's visit.

It was her policy to express ignorance, and not to admit that she had any suspicions that the Mexican was not what he seemed.

Soon the marshal of El Paso would come at the head of a force large enough to capture the ranch and all its inmates, and she felt sure that the moment the place was in the possession of Goldlace he would be able to discover proof enough to convict all of the outlaws.

And now all she could do was to gain all time possible; deny everything, for she knew the spy could not affirm that she had anything directly to do with the matter.

When Don Ramon put the question in regard to the marshal, Margaret assumed a look of dense ignorance, and shook her head.

"You do not know anything about the matter, of course!" the Mexican observed, sarcastically.

"I perceive that it is useless for me to deny, for you evidently do not believe me," she replied.

The other was irritated by her persistency, and plainly allowed his annoyance to be seen.

"It is an idle waste of time to talk with you!" he exclaimed, angrily.

"But do not for an instant imagine that I am deceived. I know now that you have come into my ranch as the spy of this El Paso marshal, but what game he is trying to play puzzles me."

"I would have treated you like a queen, but now, since I find that you have come here for the sole purpose of doing me harm, blame yourself if I act somewhat rudely in forcing you to speak."

"For the last time, I ask you to tell me why Goldlace sent you into this house. If you refuse you will suffer."

"I haven't anything to tell you," Margaret replied, simply.

Don Ramon blew a shrill whistle.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN UNEXPECTED MOVEMENT.

IN obedience to the signal Senora Vasques came into the apartment followed by a couple of ruffianly-looking herdsmen.

"I regret that I am obliged to submit you to an unpleasant search," Don Ramon remarked, "but I am curious to see the letter

which you designed to send—I am very curious sometimes.

"Now then will you produce this letter without delay, or shall I be obliged to request this lady to search you, just as prisoners are searched after entering a prison?"

For a moment Margaret was undecided.

The letter was dispatched, so that there wasn't any danger of it being discovered, and she did not possess anything that would betray her secret.

But, in a secret pocket of her dress she carried a small revolver, and secreted in her bosom was a tiny dagger.

It was the sense of security induced by the knowledge that she possessed these weapons which induced her to trust herself so fearlessly in the lonely ranch.

If she submitted to be searched, she felt sure the moment the weapons were discovered they would be taken from her, and then she would be defenseless in the power of a man whom she believed to be capable of committing any crime.

At all cost she must retain her weapons.

She had entered upon this contest with her eyes open and had not neglected any precautions which would enable her to win the fight.

She had even taken care to provide herself with an abundance of cartridges so that if she had occasion to use her revolver she would not run short of ammunition.

Quickly ran the busy thoughts through her brain.

At all risks she must not allow herself to be deprived of her weapons.

"When the lion's skin falls short eke it out with the fox's."

There is a great deal of wisdom in the pithy sentence of the old Greek, and on this occasion the girl acted on the ancient advice which has come down to us from the dust of ages.

Open force could not be used; the lion's skin *was* short, but by secret cunning—playing the part of a fox—Don Ramon's present advantage might be set at naught.

Margaret's quick wits speedily devised a method to escape from her unpleasant situation.

"I haven't any objection to be searched," she said, with a scornful smile. "And I feel sure that after the search is made you will see that I haven't told you anything but the truth."

"Senora, will you attend to this business?" Don Ramon asked, masking the command by the apparent request.

The woman nodded, having been previously instructed that her services would probably be required in this direction.

Don Ramon and the herdsman retired.

The display of force had been for the purpose of overawing the girl and convincing her that there wasn't any course open to her except to yield obedience to the commands of her captors.

"Oh, isn't this dreadful?" Margaret exclaimed to the woman in pretended fright after the door had closed behind the men.

"The best way for you to do, my dear, is to do exactly as Don Ramon wants, and then you will not have any trouble," the other counseled.

"He's a very easy man to get along with if you don't cross him, but I wouldn't like to stand in the shoes of any one who rouses his anger, and I would advise you in this matter to do exactly as he wishes."

"If you have come into the ranch with the idea of playing the spy upon him, I would advise you to say so. Tell all you know about the matter. Don't you fool yourself with the idea that this marshal of El Paso can do any more for you than Don Ramon can, because he can't."

"I'm a woman of the world and have seen a great deal of life in my time and I am not one of the kind who believes in beating about the bush."

"I suppose that money is at the bottom of this; the marshal is going to pay you a good, big sum of money if you can succeed in discovering that Don Ramon is a very bad man; that is the truth, isn't it?"

"Oh, no," Margaret replied, immediately.

The woman frowned at the ready answer.

"Bah! you are a foolish girl and hav'n't the sense to see on which side your bread is buttered!" she exclaimed, angrily.

"Don Ramon will do a hundred times

more for you than the marshal of El Paso will ever be willing to do, and if you were only wise you would throw the marshal overboard and attach yourself to Don Ramon."

"He is a liberal man and thinks no more of gold than if the coins were like stones, lying convenient to every one's hand."

"Abandon the marshal, serve Don Ramon and you will never regret it!"

The woman judged all the rest of the world by herself, and knowing that, under like circumstances, she would not have the slightest compunction at betraying the man whom she had agreed to serve, imagined she could influence the girl to do the same.

But Margaret was made of sterner stuff. In the first place, she had determined that, come what may, she would not acknowledge she had anything to do with the captured spy, and then too, now that she was alone with the woman, she was prepared to put into execution a plan which seemed likely to succeed in turning the tables upon her captors.

Margaret shook her head.

"Oh, you are so utterly mistaken about this matter!" she exclaimed.

"Honestly and truly, I haven't anything to tell you, and I am quite willing that you should search me, for I hav'n't anything to conceal!"

The woman was perplexed by the girl's manner.

From the very beginning she had not looked upon her with favor and had predicted that her visit to the ranch could only result in evil.

There was only one probable explanation—assuming that the girl was not the innocent maiden she claimed to be—and that was, she had been careful not to carry upon her person any proofs that would betray she was the spy of the marshal of El Paso.

"Well, I hope for your sake that it is as you say, and that you hav'n't come into this house with the idea of doing any mischief," the woman remarked, "for Don Ramon is an awful violent man when his anger is aroused, and he never stops to reflect upon the consequences."

"I wouldn't undertake to cross him for anything in the world."

"I am alone and helpless, but as I know you will not find anything upon me to confirm the suspicions which have been excited, I do not fear," Margaret replied.

"I shall search you dreadful keenly!" warned the woman.

"You are at liberty to do so; I am not at all afraid of the search," answered Margaret.

The woman approached her, without the slightest suspicion that Margaret intended to offer any resistance and, consequently, she was taken entirely by surprise when the captive produced a ready cocked revolver from her pocket and leveled it at her.

"Don't attempt to give an alarm," warned Margaret, "or I will kill you with as little mercy as though you were only a mad-dog!"

A gasp of surprise came from the senora and she quailed before the determined look of the girl.

The Mexican woman was not of the stuff of which heroines are made, and in the fearless eyes of the captive she read that Margaret meant every word she said.

"For the love of Heaven, be careful!" she exclaimed, trembling in every limb. "I wouldn't do anything to harm you for the world!"

There was a closet in the room, and Margaret knew from a previous examination that it had a stout lock, and the key was on the outside ready for use.

"Go into that closet!" the captive commanded.

"Into the closet?" stammered the woman, slow to comprehend.

"Yes, that is what I said. I wish to get you out of the way for awhile. Come, obey, and be quick about it!"

"Yes, yes, I will do anything you say, but I don't understand why you want me to go in the closet," said the woman, as she advanced to it, still menaced by the leveled revolver.

"Never mind, it isn't necessary that you should understand; obey, that is all I want."

"You are very foolish to try this game!" the woman exclaimed, as she retreated into

the closet. "It will not do you the least bit of good."

"I am the best judge in regard to that," Margaret rejoined.

And then she closed and locked the closet door, and when this was done, she hurried to the door which led into the entry and locked that also. The door was stout and the lock strong, so an entrance could not be easily forced.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

FRUITLESS EFFORTS.

THIS movement had been accomplished without anything transpiring to excite the suspicions of those upon the outside of the door, that aught was wrong.

Not for a moment did the idea enter the mind of Don Ramon that the girl would attempt to offer resistance, but of course he had not the slightest suspicion that the girl whom he thought he could make obedient to his will, possessed a nature as determined and resolute as his own.

After locking the door, Margaret set out to build a barricade in front of it with the tables and chairs.

The door was a strong one, no light, wooden, flimsy, machine-made thing.

The lock, too, was a massive old-fashioned one.

It would require considerable force to break a way through the door, and as she was well-armed and provided with plenty of ammunition, Margaret nothing doubted that she could "hold the fort."

She was a desperate woman, and had made up her mind that if any one attempted to force a passage through the door, she would shoot to kill.

If she could only succeed in keeping them at bay for a few hours, assistance would be sure to come, for she was certain that the moment Goldlace received her letter, he would use all possible speed to raise a force sufficiently large to not only storm the ranch and rescue her, but also make captive all the outlaws.

So, after erecting her barricade, she prepared for battle.

If the casement had not been guarded by strong iron bars, like a prison—a precaution designed to prevent any one from gaining access to the house from the outside through it—she would have endeavored to effect her escape by that way, but as it was not possible, all she could do was to make as brave a defense as was in her power.

Meanwhile Don Ramon, in the corridor, was waiting impatiently for the woman to complete her search.

Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes elapsed, and yet the Mexican dame did not make her appearance.

"What the deuce has got into the woman?" he exclaimed.

"She ought to have been able to search the girl thoroughly inside of ten minutes. I am not going to wait here forever."

Advancing to the door, he knocked upon it.

"Come, come! hurry up inside there!" he exclaimed.

There wasn't any answer, a circumstance which puzzled him.

Again he knocked loudly upon the door.

"What is the matter with you inside there—why don't you answer?"

There being no reply to this demand any more than to the first, his suspicions that something was wrong within the room were immediately excited.

"Hallo! hallo!" he exclaimed, thundering on the door with his clinched fist; "open the door immediately!"

Again no answer, for Margaret judged that it was wise not to speak until she was actually forced so to do.

"Has the woman suddenly been stricken with deafness?" Don Ramon cried, taking hold of the knob and endeavoring to open the door.

To his amazement he discovered that it was fastened.

Then perceiving that the key was upon the inside, an inkling in regard to the truth flashed upon him.

"Can it be possible that this girl has managed to overpower your wife, Jack?" he exclaimed to his lieutenant.

Taos Jack shook his head. The supposition did not appear reasonable to him, and he said as much.

"That gal could never git away with my old woman, nohow you kin fix it!" he declared.

"She may have had a weapon concealed, and taken your wife by surprise," Don Ramon observed.

"Something is wrong, of course, or else your wife would answer when I speak."

"Yes, it 'pears that way to me."

"And the door being locked upon the inside, too; she did not do that, for there wasn't any occasion for to do any such thing."

"Thar's no mistake 'bout that!"

"Taos, I reckon we have caught a Tartar here in this girl, and we are going to have trouble!" Don Ramon exclaimed, decidedly.

"Waal, cap'n, you see I wasn't much out of the way when I warned you that you had better be keeful how you fooled around this gal!" Taos Jack remarked, with the air of a prophet.

"The girl must be mad to attempt to offer resistance, and she helpless here in our power!" the outlaw chief exclaimed, now thoroughly enraged, and then with his fist he thundered on the door.

"Open the door immediately, or I will break it in!" he cried.

"Say, cap'n, the gal couldn't have cut her lucky through the window, could she?" Taos Jack asked.

"Oh, no, not the least chance of that. The window is guarded by stout, iron bars. I had them put there in anticipation of just such an affair as this," Don Ramon answered.

And then again he banged on the door with his fist.

"Come, open the door, or it will be the worse for you!"

But the girl within made no sign.

"Lemme take a whack at the door with my foot," Taos Jack suggested.

"That will make a big racket, and make her think we are coming right in, and, mebbe, I can spring the door open."

"All right, go ahead!"

Taos Jack was a powerful fellow, and he planted a vigorous kick upon the door, right by the side of the latch; but though the door trembled under the shock, yet it was too good a bit of work, and the lock was far too strong, to be materially affected.

The outlaw shook his head dubiously.

"I'm afeard, cap'n, that this hyer job is a leetle too much for me," he observed.

"I reckon it will take a battering-ram for to bu'st in this hyer door!"

"It is a mighty solid piece of business, I kin tell you!"

"Yes, there isn't the least doubt about that."

"I'll try a second kick, though, jest for greens," he observed.

And into this attack he put all the strength that he could muster, but the second attack was no more successful than the first.

"Oh, I tell you, it's solid!" Taos Jack exclaimed, almost breathless from his exertion.

"Yes, it will not be possible to force a way in without using an ax or some such tool," Don Ramon remarked.

"But I hate to break the door down. I'll try to reason with the girl."

Then coming close to the door, he cried:

"Why don't you open the door? What can you hope to gain by refusing me admission? Don't you know that it will be an easy matter for me to get an ax and break a way through the door? And if you put me to any such trouble as that, you may rest assured I will make you pay dearly for it!"

Then Ramon waited for a few moments, so that the girl would have time to think the matter over.

He thought that when she came to reflect she would see the folly of attempting to brave his power, and conclude to open the door.

But not a word came from her.

A bitter oath escaped from the lips of the outlaw chief when he found the girl thus obdurate.

"The she-devil!" he cried. "She is as obstinate as a mule, but when an entrance is gained into the room and she is once more in

my power, I will make her repent this bit of folly in tears of blood!"

"For the last time I ask you will you open the door?" he exclaimed loudly, thundering with his fist on the portal.

No answer came, and then in hot rage Don Ramon bade the herdsman, who was no other than the half-breed desperado, Apache Pete, fetch an ax.

"I hate to break in the door," the outlaw chief remarked, after his satellite had departed, but I don't see any other way to bring this obstinate woman to her senses.

"Oh, but will I not make her pay dearly for this act of folly though?"

"You see, cap'n, I was right when I said that these strange women didn't bring no luck to gen'lemen in our trade," Taos Jack remarked.

"Yes, you were right, and I was a fool to bother my head with her, but her beauty caught my fancy, and there was a mild strange sort of grace about her that fascinated me."

"I thought I would be able to mold her to my purpose after taking possession of her and reckoned she would be of a great deal of use to us 'in our business.'"

"Waal, I reckon if you could have worked the trick, you was 'bout right thar," the other remarked.

"The gal is as full of pluck as an egg is of meat, and she would have made a lively rustler if she had only taken kindly to it."

"But now I'll put her through such a course of sprouts that when it is ended she will be glad to beg on her bended knees for mercy!" the outlaw chief cried fiercely.

The return of Apache Pete at this moment with the ax put a stop to the conversation.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A BRAVE WOMAN.

"Now then, Taos, take the ax and break in the door!" Don Ramon commanded.

"Strike as near to the lock as you can, so as to avoid injuring the wood any more than you can help."

"A couple of heavy blows will be pretty certain to start the bolt I think."

"Oh, I reckon so!" and Taos first went through the usual preliminaries, so commonly indulged in by men who are about to do something extraordinary in the ax-handling line, of spitting on his hands, then, grasping the tool, which was an unusually large and heavy one, he swung it in the air.

Taos Jack was an expert in this line, for in his young days he had "put in" a good many days at wood-chopping.

"Wait a moment!" Don Ramon exclaimed as his lieutenant brandished the heavy ax in the air.

"Let me give her a last warning—let me tell her that we have an ax here and are about to break a way through the door."

"Perhaps when she finds that we really mean business she may be induced to alter her mind and open the door."

"If she does, it will save us the trouble of breaking it in."

"All right, cap'n, jest as you say, but I reckon you might as well save your breath," the other replied, canting the ax over his shoulder to wait the result.

And the lieutenant was more correct in his judgment as to what the action of the girl would be than the outlaw leader.

Margaret listening at the door, had heard all the warnings which had been addressed her by the man into whose power she had fallen, but she kept firmly to her resolve not to answer.

Her object was to gain all the time that could possibly be had.

Every fleeting minute brought the marshal of El Paso, the renowned High Horse, nearer and nearer to the lonely ranch in the foothills.

Every minute increased the chance of her rescue.

But when she found that the outlaws had procured an ax and intended to make an assault upon the door, she understood that she could not much longer hope to remain passive.

She did not doubt though that she would be able to offer a successful resistance, for she had made up her mind that the moment an attack was commenced on the door she would open fire with her revolver, and at such a short range—despite the fact that the

bullets would have to pass through the wood of the door—she thought she could not fail to materially damage some of the attackers.

But she did not intend that the besieger should have any idea of the offensive measures which she had made up her mind to adopt until they began their assault upon the door.

It was her plan to treat them to a surprise as unexpected as it would be unpleasant.

"The obstinate fool!" exclaimed the outlaw chief in wrath.

"Her fate be on her own head! Batter in the door!"

Taos Jack swung his ax high in the air but the stroke never fell upon the wood for just as he was about to strike the woman, thus rudely brought to bay like a cornered wolf, showed her teeth in the most emphatic manner.

The report of a revolver shot rung out from within the room.

The ax dropped from the grasp of Taos Jack and a bitter curse came from his lips.

"The infernal she devil has plugged me!" he cried, clutching at his right shoulder with his left hand.

Hardly had the words escaped from his lips when a second shot followed the first.

This bullet, however, found no billet in human flesh; but made the uninjured two toughs get out of range, by moving from in front of the door in short order.

"Are you badly hurt?" the outlaw chief asked.

"Waal, no; I reckon not, although the durned thing has torn a hole in my shoulder."

"It's an ugly scratch, but nothing more, I reckon."

Opening the flannel shirt of Taos Jack, Don Ramon examined the wound, and found that the surmise of the injured man was correct.

It was only a flesh wound and not at all likely to prove dangerous.

"I tell you w'ot it is, cap'n, this gal is a tiger-cat, claws and all!" Taos Jack exclaimed, ruefully.

"It isn't of any use to try to break in the door as long as she has that revolver in her possession," the outlaw chief remarked.

"It is only risking our lives, for she will be pretty certain to plug some of us for keeps."

Both of the others nodded their heads in a decided manner, as proof that they agreed to this idea.

"And, whatever we do, we must be careful to keep out of range or this tiger-cat will be apt to settle our hash."

Again the others nodded assent. There was no disputing a proposition so entirely clear.

"I have a plan to force the door open, and we can carry it out without giving this she-demon a chance to use us for targets."

"That is the game we want to play," Taos Jack observed, with a grimace as a twinge of pain in his shoulder reminded him that he had not in this affair used the caution upon which he was wont to pride himself.

"I will fill the lock with gunpowder, put in a fuse and blow it to pieces."

"That will work!" Taos Jack exclaimed, in delight.

And a broad grin came over the dull features of Apache Pete too, for the idea seemed perfectly feasible to him.

"We can do the trick easily enough without exposing ourselves to her fire and she will neither be able to prevent us from preparing the mine or keep it from blowing the lock to atoms."

"Let's git at it as soon as we kin!" Taos Jack exclaimed.

"And I say, cap'n, arter the she-devil is in our hands you must fix it some way so I kin git squar' with her for this durned ugly wound that she has given me."

"Oh, you shall have ample revenge, don't fear in regard to that!" Don Ramon cried.

"But we must set to work at once, for I am eager to show this female fiend that we are her masters."

This conversation had been carried on in low tones, so that though Margaret had listened intently, judging that after the defeat of the open assault with the ax, they would plan some new device to gain them entrance to the room, she had not been able to overhear what was said.

After the assailants had decided upon their

plan they did not lose any time in putting it in operation.

By means of a paper tube they deftly conveyed the powder through the keyhole into the lock.

And the moment that Margaret heard them fumbling about the lock she sent a couple of revolver-bullets through the door, one just over the lock and the other under it.

Thanks to the precautions adopted though by the outlaw chief, there wasn't the slightest danger of any one of them being hit.

Their bodies were out of range, protected by the thick wall, through which no revolver-bullet could find its way, and Don Ramon's hand and wrist, engaged in the task of transferring the powder into the lock by means of the keyhole, was amply protected by the lock itself.

The outlaws laughed long and jeeringly at the unsuccessful results of the shots, and the road-agent chief cried in glee:

"Fire away, my beauty! The more bullets you get rid of now the less you will have to fire!"

"Inside of five minutes we will have this door open and then, woe betide you for the trouble you have made!"

Margaret comprehended that they were up to some trick, and from the confident way in which the outlaw chief spoke, came to the conclusion that they really had devised some way to break down the door without exposing themselves to her fire.

So she set her wits to cope with this danger.

Already she had made a barricade in front of the door of the tables and chairs, overturned, in anticipation of just such an event.

Now, nerved to desperation by the imminent danger, and seemingly gifted with almost superhuman strength by her perilous position, she dragged the heavy bed across the room and braced it against the door, first removing the chairs and table, and then when the bed was placed, piling them all on top of it.

Then she took a position on one side of the bed, covered by the massive head-piece, but commanding the entrance.

Any one attempting to enter the room would have to either clamber over or remove the barricade, and the attempt to do either would expose the assailant to almost certain death, and the girl was protected from the bullets of those in the entry by the head-board of the bed.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THROWING OFF THE MASK.

Just as the girl had completed her preparations and come to the conclusion that there wasn't anything more that she could do to guard against an attack, the outlaws without also finished their task.

The lock had been filled with a goodly quantity of gunpowder, and a fuse extemporized out of a bit of string, wetted and then dipped in the powder.

When all the preparations were complete Don Ramon warned his men.

"Now then, stand clear, for there's no telling how big a racket this will make."

The others retired to what they considered to be a safe distance, then Black Blaze lit the fuse and followed their example.

A sharp explosion followed.

As the projector of the scheme had anticipated the lock was torn all to pieces by the force of the exploding gunpowder, and a hole as big as a man's head shattered in the door.

A cry of triumph went up from the throats of the outlaws when they beheld the destruction that the potent gunpowder had wrought.

But it was followed by an exclamation of disappointment from Don Ramon, when through the hole in the shattered door he caught a glimpse of the barricade which the girl had erected.

Immediately he saw how difficult and dangerous would be any attempt to force a passage through the obstruction, exposed to the bullets of the determined woman.

Taos Jack comprehended the situation about as soon as the outlaw chief.

"Thunder and lightning!" he exclaimed, "we hain't made much headway hyer arter all."

"The lock is bu'sted but it 'pears to me that we are as far off from gitting into the room as ever!"

"Yes, it must be admitted that this tiger-cat has got decidedly the best of us," Don Ramon responded in deep vexation.

"It will not be possible to force an entrance into the room without risking our lives, for this she-demon is desperate, and shoots to kill, and it would be no satisfaction to take the woman at the sacrifice of the life of some of us."

"You bet it wouldn't!" Taos Jack exclaimed, decidedly, while the half-breed remarked:

"I ain't a cat with half a dozen lives to throw away!"

"But one thing is certain, if we can't get in, she can't get out," the outlaw chief explained.

"I don't know how she is fixed for ammunition, but, if she hasn't an extra supply, her revolver must be pretty nearly empty, although she may have a pair for all I know."

"When her cartridges give out, she will be at our mercy, and we can force an entrance into the room without any trouble. But, if she has an extra supply, she can bid defiance to our efforts to dislodge her."

"The game is in our hands, though, and all we have to do is to let her alone, only putting a guard over her so that she cannot escape."

"There isn't a morsel of anything to eat, nor a drop of water in the room, and hunger and thirst will do our job for us right up to the handle, if we only give them time to get in their fine work."

A fierce chuckle came from the lips of the others, as this new view of the situation was presented to them.

"Then, too, she has got to keep awake day and night, for if she attempts to get any sleep, we will take advantage of it to get into the room."

"You see, boys, she is in a trap, and no mistake, in spite of the fact that she has been able to get the best of the fight so far."

"Yes, yes; all we have to do is to let her alone, and when the thing is ripe it will drop right into our hands!" Taos Jack exclaimed.

"Exactly, that is our game and I was a donkey not to think of it before."

"And now I will just let her see that she is in a trap from whence there is no escape."

Then he addressed the girl:

"Now, then, you she-demon, are you going to let us in peaceably or must we force an entrance?"

Margaret judged that the time had at last come for her to speak, and so she made answer:

"You had better not attempt anything of the kind!" she exclaimed, "for the first one who comes within range of my bullet will be a dead man."

"Oho! you are crowing pretty loud for a petticoat warrior!" Don Ramon retorted.

"Don't you know that our capture of you is only a question of time, and that you do not stand any more chance of escaping from our clutches than of flying up through the roof?"

"Don't you be too sure of that. There is many a slip between the cup and the lip," the girl retorted.

"I warn you that if you or any of your murderous gang attempt to enter the room I will most surely kill them!"

"Bosh! your revolver must be pretty nearly empty now!"

"It is not; it is full of cartridges. I have an abundant supply. I took care to look out for that before I trusted myself in your power."

This speech and the preceding one rather made Don Ramon open his eyes, for they seemed to indicate that his disguise had been penetrated, and the fact was known that he was the desperate leader of an outlaw band.

"What do you mean by that?" he asked.

"What do you mean by my murderous gang and why should you take the precaution to arm yourself as if for battle before coming to my ranch?"

"What do you take me to be anyway?"

Margaret was nervous and excited, and so she spoke heedlessly and revealed what possibly she had better kept concealed.

"Oh, I know you, dark villain that you are, and, like a bloodhound, I have followed on your track, determined to bring you to justice."

"Remember Ernestine Gravenstine!"

The name was hurled in his teeth so sud-

denly and so totally unexpected, that for a moment he was staggered.

"Ernestine Gravenstine!" he exclaimed, half mechanically.

"Yes, the bright, lovable girl whom you took from Washington to this wild, western land, where she found a nameless grave, instead of the life of happiness to which she so confidently looked forward."

"What know you of her?" Don Ramon asked, so astonished by this unexpected disclosure that in his curiosity to learn what connection there could be between the woman whom he betrayed, and whom in a moment of passion, when she had attempted to escape from him, he had brutally murdered in cold blood, that he did not think it worth while to attempt to deny knowledge of the matter.

"I was her bosom friend, the girl with whom she constantly corresponded," Margaret answered.

"I was away from Washington when you chanced to make your appearance and cast your baleful shadow over the brightness of her life."

"If I had seen you I feel sure I could have saved my poor Ernestine from the terrible fate to which you doomed her, for I am certain I could have discovered from your face that you were a dangerous man and not what you appeared to be."

"And when her letters came to me with the information that, after reaching this wild land, she had made the awful discovery that the kingly man whom she wedded was nothing but the captain of a miserable, outlaw band, whose wild deeds had horrified the frontier, I made up my mind to follow in the chase, and if I could not rescue her from your clutches I could at least bring down the justly-merited punishment upon your guilty head."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the daring leader of the Black Beards, by this time recovering from the astonishment into which he had been thrown by this unexpected disclosure.

"Upon my word, this is quite a romance, really remarkable, I assure you!"

"If you ever have the good luck to get out of my clutches—which, by the way, is extremely improbable until death comes to your assistance, as it did to the whimpering, wailing Ernestine—it would be a capital idea to make a book out of this romantic story."

"Truth, they say, is stranger than fiction, and this, I am sure, would doubly discount the yarns of any of these professional storytellers gotten up out of their own heads."

"But, joking aside, you are a deuced plucky woman and I really admire you, although you have caused me a good deal of trouble."

"I'll make you a fair offer: I haven't any wife at present and such a woman as you are will about fill the bill."

"I am the captain of the greatest band that has ever made the borders of the Rio Grande howl at their deeds. I am well fixed too, and if you'll join your fate to mine I can promise you a life such as few women in this world ever get a chance to lead."

"Come, what do you say?"

In withering contempt came the girl's reply:

"Get thee behind me, Satan!"

CHAPTER XL.

"ALL THINGS COME TO ONE WHO WAITS."

THE outlaw chief of the Black Beards was honest enough in his offer, for, despite all the circumstances of the case, he had taken a great liking to the girl, and was willing to overlook the persistent hatred with which she had pursued him.

"Well, you are old enough to choose for yourself," he remarked, when she rejected his offer so disdainfully. "And I am not the kind of man inclined to waste time in endeavoring to change a willful woman from the path which she has selected."

"But you are going to be mine though, all the same, whether you consent or not."

"A man like myself don't stand upon any ceremony in these little matters. You will stay here until thirst and starvation exert their powerful influence upon you, and then perhaps, you will be glad to sing another tune."

"Never!" cried Margaret, spiritedly.

"Wait until you make the trial," Don Ramon counseled with a sardonic smile.

"Until you have experienced the pangs of hunger and thirst, you haven't the slightest idea of how greatly a human can suffer.

"I know that you are a plucky girl; this dangerous game which you have played so boldly, is ample proof of that, but I rather think you will weaken after a day's experience in this room without either food or water.

"Then you will be deprived of sleep, too, for I will keep men on the watch here constantly, arranging them in gangs, so that they will be fresh all the time, while you will not be able to close your eyes under the penalty of having your fortress stormed.

"Oh, it's a fine deal that you have laid out for yourself, and if you don't weaken in four-and-twenty hours, then you are far tougher than I take you to be."

"We shall see," said Margaret, contenting herself with this simple reply, for now that her excitement had in a measure cooled, she began to think that she had been rash in speaking as freely as she had done.

But whether she had been so or not, she was determined that in the future she would keep a guard upon her tongue, and particularly did she feel the necessity of not saying anything which would be apt to lead the outlaw chief of the Black Beards to suppose that she had any expectation of assistance reaching her.

Leaving Apache Pete on the watch, Don Ramon and Taos Jack sought the lower apartment where arrangements were made in regard to the sentinels who were to look after the prisoner.

"And that reminds me—what on earth do you suppose has become of my old woman?" asked Taos Jack, abruptly.

"She was in the room, you know, but she didn't make nary sign while you were holding your confab with the gal.

"Do you 'spose the durned tiger-cat has killed the old dame?"

"Oh, no, I guess not," Don Ramon replied. "Nothing is certain, she didn't use her revolver on her or else we would have heard the shot.

"Let me see! there's a closet in that room with a strong lock upon the door.

"That is the game this beauty has played. She caught your wife off her guard, drew her revolver on her and then corraled her in the closet."

"If we have to starve this heifer out it will be mighty rough on the old woman too," Taos Jack observed with a grin.

"Yes, but it will not hurt her any. On the contrary it will be a lesson and teach her to keep her wits about her the next time that she has anything to do with a prisoner. She will not be apt to allow anybody else to play roots on her."

"The old woman is a mighty big eater and she will be about crazy if she has to go without her fodder for fifteen or twenty hours."

"Oh, I don't have any idea that the girl will hold out for that length of time," the outlaw chief answered.

"Sleep is what is going to win our game for us. The girl will never be able to keep on the watch constantly.

"Her eyes will be certain to grow heavy and as we will be on the lookout all the time, the moment she dozes we will storm the fortification."

It was as the leader of the Black Beards had said.

As the minutes lengthened into hours and no sign of the expected rescue came, the girl, her nerves strung to their tightest tension, began to feel as if she would lose the use of her senses.

It was a terrible position.

She began to feel the effects of the weary watch, compelled to be on the alert all the time for fear that the outlaws would take advantage of a careless moment and surprise her.

She began to feel that she was becoming drowsy.

In spite of her firm will and her resolute determination that she would not allow fatigue to overcome her, she felt that her eyes were slowly closing, and she feared that soon she would not be able to fight off the feeling.

She rose to her feet and paced up and down the room as restless as a caged tiger.

For a while this was effectual and the drowsiness vanished, but the moment she hesitated in her rapid strides the sensation returned again.

"Oh, heaven!" she cried in agony, "it is only a question of time! Will I be able to fight off this deadly sleep until the marshal of El Paso comes with his force to rescue me?"

The drowsiness was taking such a firm hold upon her that she felt the question was a most difficult one.

As nearly as she could calculate, it was about six hours since she had dispatched the spy with the letter, and surely there had been ample time for him to reach El Paso—for the marshal to gather his forces and ride to the lonely ranch.

At last, she became so weary with her restless tramp that her limbs would not sustain her.

She must sit down, even at the risk of falling asleep.

Placing a chair behind the head-board of the bed, and arranging it so that the slightest movement of the bed would not fail to disturb her, she sunk into it.

She had not been seated five minutes before her head sunk back against the bedstead and her eyes closed.

Ten minutes passed, and then the watcher without—it was the reckless, sandy-bearded Red Jose, one of the best men in the gang—perceiving that the girl gave no sign of life, a state of affairs for which he had been expressly enjoined to watch, crept slowly up to the door and peered through the hole which had been made by the explosion when the lock was shattered.

"She's asleep, by blazes!" he muttered. "I'll warn the cap'n, and we'll go for her."

Flushed with anticipations of the triumph soon to come, Red Jose hastened to the stairway.

All of the outlaws were gathered in the court-yard, examining some new horses which one of the herdsmen had just brought in.

"By Jove! boys, these will make the best mounts we have had!" the desperado heard the chief of the Black Beards exclaim, as he descended the stairs.

Hardly had the words been spoken when they were followed by yells of alarm and the rush of many feet.

Pistol-shots rung on the air, and the din of Babel resounded.

Red Jose understood what had happened. The event which the outlaws had ever always dreaded had come at last.

They were surprised!

Drawing his revolvers, the desperado rushed down to join his brothers in the fight.

His supposition was correct.

Goldlace, the High Horse of the Pacific, now for the nonce marshal of El Paso, with a well-armed posse of twenty of the best men that the town of El Paso could furnish, had surprised the ranch of the outlaws, and so well had he managed the affair that none of the Black Beards had the slightest suspicion that a hostile force was in the neighborhood until the townsmen rushed through the gateway, crying:

"Throw up your hands or die!"

But, to give the outlaws due credit, they scorned to surrender, and immediately attempted to draw their weapons.

The marshal's posse, though, had "the drop" on them in the worst kind of way, and when they saw that the outlaws were disposed to show fight, they slaughtered them without mercy.

The fight didn't last five minutes, for inside of that time every one of the outlaws was either dead or severely wounded.

Don Ramon, the famous Black Beard captain, had been the first to fall, struck down by the first shot fired from the revolver of the High Horse, who had marked the bandit chief for his game right at the beginning.

It was his idea that the downfall of the leader would "stampede" the rest, and so it happened, for, after the death of the daring and desperate Black Blaze, the others lost heart.

Goldlace had not intended to kill Don Ramon, only to disable him, but he "builded better than he knew," for his shot was deadly.

Our tale is told.

The Black Beards were never heard of again, and as the desperadoes were destroyed, our hero resigned his office of marshal, despite the protests of the citizens, and in company with Margaret, who, now that the mission of vengeance was fulfilled, had time for other things of a softer nature, departed for the North.

The two odd natures had formed a great liking for each other, and at some future time we may tell of their wanderings amid the wild scenery of southern Utah.

THE END.

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